

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

The Influence of Social Media on the Athletic World

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SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

Abstract

Social media is an effective tool used by members of the athletic industry including athletes, teams, media outlets, and fans. This digital technology can impact athletes' mental and physical wellness, social identity, NIL (name, image, and likeness) deals, brand partnerships, fandom relations, online/offline activity, sexual abuse, social media portfolios and criticisms. This paper explores the relationships/interactions between social media and the athletic world.

Research revealed that certain social media portfolios help an athlete to build their personal brand and collaborations, as well as impact their personal and social identities. By understanding what factors most strongly impact people in the athletic industry, we can then suggest the most accurate strategies and responses to maintaining and protecting their well-being.

Keywords: social media, social media effects, athletic performance, attractive appearance, NIL (name, image, and likeness), enterprises, fans, social identity, brand partnerships

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

The Influence of Social Media on the Athletic World

This paper's purpose is to address the effects of social media on athletics. The athletic industry includes the participating athletes, the fans, media outlets, team organizations and other related careers. Social media platforms are an extremely popular form of communication, but they can also be extremely personal and persuasive. Some people claim social media is too intrusive and poses a threat to the well-being of young children. However, it also provides an amazing opportunity to connect with people, to brand oneself, and educate others. Every experience on social media is unique to the individual and can be either positive or negative.

Social media is a unique tool for celebrities, influencers, and athletes alike to capitalize on their own name. These players are recognized as extremely talented and hard working. Many people idolize athletes because of their resistance, adaptability, and other characteristics unique to these persons/individuals. Social media has created a window to view the lives of our favorite athletes; however, the lens is sometimes altered to perceive only what athletes wish for us to view. It is important to understand how and why athletes present themselves the way they do to understand why people favor certain athletes over others. Two athletes with the same athletic ability could have extremely different fan bases due to athletes' social media posts.

The first section of this paper will discuss the different types of social media content athletes post and what factors help engagement the most. The second section discusses how the recent change with the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) rule for college athletes is affecting universities and student-athletes alike. The third section analyzes the struggles female athletes encounter while using social media in their athletic and personal lives. And the last section will review how social media has contributed to fan engagement by allowing them to interact with their favorite teams and players.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

Athletes and Social Media

Athletes have the most to gain from social media exposure. Social media portfolios can affect Name, Image, and Likeness deals, contracts, which teams offer them a chance, their personal identities, and a retirement plan. The effects mentioned prior can apply to a single stage or multiple stages of an athlete's career, whether it be high school, college, professional, or retirement. NIL and brand deals have really changed the college landscape of sports. While there is always an exception, many athletes are attending/enrolling in schools that offer the most money. A fitting example of this is Jaden Rashada, a quarterback recruit in the 2023 class. According to ESPN (2023), he signed a letter of intent with the University of Florida and was reportedly being offered a \$13 million deal with Florida's Gator Collective. However, when rumors of insufficient funds surfaced, Rashada quickly asked for a release and re-committed to Arizona State University. Rashada's decision is only one of hundreds, if not thousands, of examples of NIL money influencing a student-athlete's decision.

Professional athletes have been offered the ability to live luxurious lives because of all the sweat and tears they put into becoming the best at their sport. Contracts for these professional athletes vary extensively among leagues such as the NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLB with these athletes averaging multi-million-dollar contracts.

While athletic ability does play a huge role in the amount of money these athletes make, their social media presence can have a significant impact also. For high school athletes, exposure is everything; without proper social media exposure, there is an extremely high chance that players with talent will remain undiscovered and be forced to play down a level while other athletes who have the proper connections are able to secure spots with top schools.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

Social media can also greatly affect an athlete's ability to create a sense of self. Athletes are expected to act and hold themselves in a certain manner and this can cause issues when trying to express oneself. Athletes have to determine how much of their personal and professional life they are willing to share with the public. Many fans prefer for their favorite athletes to post as much content as possible; however, this also puts an athlete's privacy and their family's privacy at risk.

Money and Engagement

College athletes rely heavily on their ability to market themselves to profit for their university and sports team, but now they can also market themselves for outside companies/brands. According to Doyle (2022), it has been discovered that certain content can garner better engagement with fans than others. There are four categories of posts for engagement: athletic performance, attractive appearance, marketable lifestyle, and offstage content, refer to Figure 1 (Doyle, 2023). This author found that posts categorized by athletic performance attracted better engagement than the other three categories. In addition, picture quality and the appearance of teammates in posts also boosted engagement, while non-transparent sponsorships and hashtags negatively impacted likes and comments. Athletes can also capitalize on a distinctive characteristic, such as a nickname or tattoo. For example, Giannis Antetokounmpo has trademarked multiple names/catch phrases all stemming from 'Greek Freak' due to growing up in Greece. Connor McGregor has multiple eye-catching tattoos across his chest which are often featured in his social media posts. Distinctive features differentiate athletes from one another and allow for their loyal fan bases to develop. It is important for a content creator to understand what the consumer wants so that athletes can know what does and does not

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

work and adjust their social behavior accordingly to increase chances of expanding their follower, like, and comment numbers.

How Personal Is Too Personal?

Many athletes find that they cannot always portray their true selves on social media because their persona may not fit the narrative the fans desire or they prefer to maintain some sense of privacy. Whether either scenario is true, many find that they need to manage the types of content they release to the public. Some choose to share their daily lives to appear more normal while others embrace stardom and focus solely on athletic content. According to Korzynski (2016), different social media channels have specific functions. Twitter allows for “real time interaction,” Facebook “enriches the fans’ experience,” and Instagram focuses more on personal daily lives. Yoo (2022) mentions that self-censorship has many factors that can influence their social media posts. Things like geographic location, religion, and political opinions all influence what an athlete can say or support both online and offline. If an athlete can effectively censor controversial opinions, that athlete can then protect their reputation while connecting with the largest amount of people. However, many athletes find this conduct does not fit their goals and decide to disregard the personalities people expect and stay true to their beliefs, morals, and values unequivocally.

A recent example of how censorship makes a difference is with Memphis Grizzlies player Ja Morant (Irving, 2023). Over the last year, he was involved in multiple physical and verbal incidents, and most recently was found to be brandishing a gun in a video for social media. If Morant could have self-censored his actions both online and offline, he would not have faced an 8-game suspension. Due to the suspension, an advertisement with Coca-Cola’s Powerade scheduled to be released amid March Madness was cancelled. The cancellation of

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

Morant's commercial is a real example of how the portrayal of oneself online can directly impact the ability to work with desirable brands.

NIL: Big Names, Big Money

Brand deals and partnerships are now referred to as NIL, "name, image, and likeness." NIL has become a big factor of college sports. There are opposing views on how paying student athletes will affect the industry with some people loving the outcomes and others fearing it will lead to the demise of college sports. In the past, the NCAA has banned college athletes from profiting from their personal brand but allowed universities and colleges to make thousands, if not millions, of dollars. As of July 1, 2021, student-athletes could sign deals with brands if they were third party endorsements. One problem athletes faced, though, was there were no true guidelines published for what they could or could not do. State laws on intellectual property usage only added to this confusion. According to Windy (2021), one of the key issues that arose was internal competition between athletic departments and individual athletes. For a brand to make a deal with an athletic department or the NCAA, it would cost a lot more money than if these brands were to focus on a relationship with an individual player that meets their wants and needs. Because of the expense, many brands have abandoned team deals and found student-athletes with ideals and characteristics that match their own. Windy's (2021) research highlights a deal between D'Eriq King and College Hunks Hauling Junk. It is likely that the company recognized characteristics they both shared (strength, speed, and reliability) and decided that King would be able to promote the brand to a large part of their target audience, college students.

Another large issue Windy (2021) touched on is gender inequality. Windy (2021) found that males do not always need strong engagement on social media to secure brand deals; however, it is a deal breaker for women. When tracking NIL deals, the site On3.com is the best

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

to reference; according to their top 100 list, only 10 of these evaluations belong to women, and when comparing the second highest evaluation for men (Arch Manning, 249k followers) to the highest evaluation for women (Livvy Dunne, 11.2M followers), there is an 11 million follower deficit between the two (Nakos, 2023), refer to Figure 2. Social media followings can highly influence the amount of money a brand will offer the athletes.

The College Take on Social Media: Athlete Edition

Social media is extremely deceiving, and it can be difficult to determine someone's true beliefs on different topics. In this section, I will report the qualitative views of five current college athletes from interviews conducted between April 6th, 2023, and April 10th, 2023. Not surprisingly, social media presents both advantages and disadvantages to how it can be used and understood. One University of Miami men's basketball player says:

Social media is beneficial; it helps me to expose my name to people across the country.

The biggest thing for basketball players to make it to the next level is exposure and clout.

There are millions of talented basketball players who do not get the right exposure and publicity behind their name to play at the college level.

Social media is a door opener for many athletes, without which many could not pursue their goal to play for a top school and play for an NBA organization. This University of Miami basketball player above specifically utilizes Instagram and Twitter to interact with fans. Without those platforms, he would lack the persona required for augmenting his visibility in college athletics. Another athlete at the University of Miami on the Men's football team also stated the ability to spread his name worldwide. Another University of Miami athlete who is on the men's football team says:

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

As you grow as an athlete, your platform is going to increase also which in turn brings in attention from brand inquiring about partnerships. Being recognized for your success is a great feeling and allows people to get to know you. Image is everything as a student-athlete.

The University of Miami Football player addressed the monetary success an athlete can achieve through social media. He described how success on and off the field can bring athletes important things like pride, happiness, and reward. These are some of the advantages players recognize through social media. Social media exposure allows athletes to be recognized for their talent, give back to their community, and make a living out of their success as an athlete.

However, there are also many things that can make social media an unsavory necessity for many athletes. That same University of Miami football player also addressed some negatives he experiences as a student-athlete:

It can negatively affect you if you are not careful about what you post online. As student athletes, we are held to a higher standard.

What athletes post online can later come back to hurt them. Many people do not consider the consequences of their actions in the moment and later come to regret them. A University of Central Florida football player explained how social media and NIL is affecting a balance between players:

Social media is the majority of how players acquire NIL deals. You can easily get caught up with trying hard to get verified and increase your follower count. This can often lead to a rift in some programs when players are only chasing the money. It can also cause players with smaller following to compare themselves to athletes with more.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

A lot of college sports have become a financial attraction. This UCF football player believes many of his teammates and peers have become more concerned with the financial prospect of college sports rather than the game itself. Because of this it could cause internal competition and rivalries that could result in verbal and physical altercations; as well as making certain players feel inferior due to social media results. And lastly a women's basketball player at Salem University touched on some negative effects female student-athletes often face:

Social media has an extremely negative implication on college sports. For women it is hard to compete when the spotlight is always on the men's programs. Social media can put a player's most embarrassing moment on blast and tarnish their reputation. It makes it seem as though 'you are not as good as the next guy.' It is hard to see other people getting recognition for something I do regularly.

Women's sports immediately face a huge obstacle: competing with men's programs for the spotlight. The lack of media attention puts many female athletes at a disadvantage who are extremely skilled and popular. The limited media attention also creates the fear of failure in many of these young female athletes because only a limited number of their game highlights will be seen and once that fear develops, it is extremely difficult to overcome. No player ever wants their mistakes to be broadcast for the entire world to see. According to this Salem University Women's basketball player, social media platforms breed a negative mindset amongst the young women that can lower their self-esteem, confidence, and diminish their game.

Against All Odds: Women Prevail

Women often face difficulties in their everyday lives. They can be objectified, talked down to, and often forgotten. This is no different for female athletes. Much of the media attention female athletes receives is lackluster and bland (Renner, 2022). If one would turn on

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

ESPN, they will see a men's game of any sport and if lucky enough to see a women's game, the women's games usually receive far less coverage and inadequate quality. Even the NCAA undervalues women's sports. The NCAA sold the rights to air the Men's March Madness tournament for \$880 million per year (Breslow, 2022) while the women's tournament is a part of a 14-year deal with 20 other championships for a measly \$500 million (Caron, 2022). Even more surprising, the NCAA did not even refer to the women's tournament as March Madness until 2022. It is astounding to believe that the NCAA would overlook such a profitable opportunity as the women's 2023 championship game, let alone set a record with 12.6 million viewers, which were comparable to the men's numbers (Caron, 2022). Female athletes do not only face these institutionalized issues, but also face objectification, sexualization, and judgment from their "fans" and "haters."

On social media, Toffoletti (2018) found that many female athletes post "sexually suggestive" and personal content. In addition, Toffoletti (2018) found that the posts that attracted the most attention and engagement were "hot" body images and/or posts with strong feminine characteristics. Critics have argued that women are constantly suggested to take advantage of their looks to gain a following/fan base. So, the fact that female athletes are constantly judged by their fans provides understanding of why they may lean toward this type of content.

I have mentioned the idea of feeding the interests and desires of fans and this is a fitting example of how it can play out. For instance, two very skilled NCAA women's basketball players, Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese, are on the Top 100 list for NIL deals across all sports. However, when examining their Instagram accounts, we can notice a dramatic difference in the type of content. Caitlin Clark (650k followers-Instagram), who some would argue to be the best women's player of all time, only posts content that could be categorized as athletic performance.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

Of the 72 posts she has as of April 10, 2023, only six do not involve her athletic accomplishments. But, when analyzing Angel Reese (1.5M followers-Instagram), a member of LSU Women's National Championship team 2023, her content is extremely diversified. She includes a lot of attractive appearance posts that have elevated levels of engagement. Reese's Instagram portfolio actively displays the three main characteristics Toffoletti (2018) described: self-love, self-disclosure, and self-empowerment. She displays photos of her embracing the different qualities and experiences of being a female athlete. Women's sports have been sexualized for years and it can be both subtle and obvious in nature. The most obvious includes the uniforms for women's sports. When comparing the uniforms for women's volleyball, gymnastics, swimming, and track teams to their male counterparts, they all have one thing in common, their revealing nature. These issues have only become more significant and prevalent with the rise of social media. Social media exposes and exacerbates these issues while blaming the young women for their feminine nature and attributes.

Athletes Are not the Only Players in the Industry

Athletes are not the only people in sports affected by social media. The teams, organizations, brands, and even team nutritionists experience the effects. The athletic world is a bustling business estimated to be worth \$890 billion (Joseph, 2023). Just a couple of decades ago, the only way to learn about one's favorite sports star was from the television, newspaper, or by showing up to an event in person. Now with just the touch of a button, we can unlock the lives of every person in the industry, regardless of where they live. But whether information about industry players is accurate and trustworthy is a valid question. Information credibility is a major issue in general regarding social media because many people forget to fact check.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

However, recently, there has been a larger difficulty to check credibility and accuracy when it comes to such frivolous information.

Nutritionists: Changing the Game with Social Media

Athletes spend much of their time with specialists, whether it be weight training, athletic trainers, position coaches, or nutritionists. Dunne et al. (2019) explored nutritionists' thoughts on the incorporation of social media in their jobs. Dunne et al. (2019) found that 89% of the participants were actively using social media to share information with their clients. “The underlying trends for social media use were to facilitate mobile and visual learning, as well as educate, nudge, and communicate with athletes across various environments, contexts and times of day” (Dunne et al., 2019). It has been found that the usage of infographics, text, and videos worked the best when trying to convey information. Informality makes learning simple and increases the likelihood of athletes seeing it. When on a road trip or just at home, most people would open a social media app before they would check their emails, so this allows for the nutritionist to convey information in the most time efficient manner possible. Social media is actively changing the way people are educating themselves because information can be accessed in just seconds.

Teams, Franchises, Media Outlets: Who Can You Really Trust?

Social media does not only benefit the athletes, but it also provides a valued opportunity for sports leagues, teams, organizations, and news platforms to engage with consumers. However, the effortless nature of social media brings into question which sources provide the most accurate and credible information. According to Na (2020), consumers found sports teams and media outlets to be more credible than athletes themselves. This lack of credibility is due to the idea of a perceived bias that the athlete would never promote a negative message about

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

themselves. Source credibility can be affected by personal biases, brand promotions, and consumer behavioral responses. However, one way for athletes to combat the lack of credibility is with collaborations with their team social media manager and news outlets such as ESPN or Overtime. The collaboration can mutually benefit both parties by creating a credible brand image for the athlete and providing desirable content for the team or news outlet. The credibility of the media outlet can allow the athlete to be supported by a publicly trusted organization and allow the fan bases to converge.

The True Heart of the Game

Another key role that exists in the world of sports is the fans. Fans are the backbone of professional sports; without them, there would be no need for these leagues and enterprises to exist. The importance of fans in this industry makes understanding the way they interact so much more significant because then athletes can directly cater to their desires. This understanding helps people to shape their identities, helps with their physical and mental well-being, and shape their friendships. It is especially prevalent on college campuses because it allows students from all over to bond over a single topic.

Get Active: How Fans Participate

Fan interactions have evolved over the last few decades from newspaper articles and live broadcasts to instant streaming platforms and social media. Social media has allowed fans to access a deeper connection with their favorite players and interact with them online. In college, social media engagement is extremely common with many students following both the teams and individual players. In 2015/2016, 86% of adults 18-29 regularly visited social media sites and 50% of programming conversations were about sports. Both rates have only increased as the years have passed with social media exploding with popularity and multiple sports events setting

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

viewership records. As previously mentioned, the NCAA women's basketball championship game set a record with nearly 12.6 million viewers (Caron, 2022). According to Kim (2019), sports allow people to escape from the stresses of their daily lives, to stay current on popular conversation topics, and socialize with their peers. Kim (2019) found that when college students participated in a sports event (played or watched), they developed a stronger level of attachment to the institution and their fellow peers. It facilitated interactions between students both in person and online. The surplus of engagement types allows for all students to enjoy college sports regardless of their personality type.

Conclusion

Social media is an extremely impactful tool in the athletic industry for all involved. The athletic industry includes the participating athletes, the enterprises, the teams, the media outlets, and the fans. It can help to advance the careers of athletes of all ages, or it can pit them against each other and cause them to spiral. It has opened the door to so many opportunities including both exposure and monetary rewards. Being an influencer is a difficult job as one must maintain an extremely public image that meets the desires of fans and brand partnerships.

The college athletes' experience has changed drastically over the last 2 years. On July 1, 2021, student-athletes could start capitalizing on their name, image, and likeness. This is a big step for college athletics and is changing the way players are recruited. Some athletes are making millions of dollars before they ever become professionals. While there are perks to making the big bucks, it also has a lot of negatives tied to it. The competitiveness for NIL brand deals can cause rifts between the athletic department and its players, cause unhealthy competition between players, lead athletes to schools that do not actually meet their wants and needs, and funnel many strong and popular players into just a few schools.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

For athletes of any age, there are certain social media portfolios that present the best results. Depending on the player and what their fan base desires, a player may choose to post primarily athletic performance posts or diversify the content with all four categories. As mentioned earlier, Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese provide two fitting examples of how social media portfolios can look. The topics one posts about, and the way one conducts themselves online/offline make a difference in the types of opportunities presented. It is the same for all people but in a much more public manner for athletes. Many of the top athletes “live in the spotlight” and must maintain a clean image to remain successful. The spotlight can linger for some athletes even after they retire. Top athletes can maintain their brand because of the successes they had during their active career. However, with one wrong move, their entire influencer profession can be snuffed out.

Female athletes face an additional obstacle of simply being female. They can be judged for the way they look and made to feel inferior to the men (Renner, 2022). They face additional battles of self-worth and comparing themselves to their male counterparts. Female athletes are told to embrace their feminine nature, but when they do, they are told to stop trying to flirt or catch the male gaze. Sexism is institutionalized in women’s sports through the rules, physicality, and even the uniforms.

While there is an extensive range of ways social media can impact an athlete, they are not the only ones affected in the industry. Teams, media, outlets, specialists, and fans all play a huge role in the usage of social media. You cannot always trust a player to be truthful about events, especially if it paints them in a negative manner. Because of this issue of credibility, when looking for statistics, many people will look at the team or media outlets page. These two groups have been deemed as credible by many fans due to their unbiased nature. Nutrition specialists

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

have begun to move their content into the social media sphere due to the easy accessibility, visual learning aspect, and timeliness of information. And fans, the heart of the team, are the main reason all these other entities use social media in the first place. Without fans, there would be no reason for athletes to have these complex social media pages. Participating in sports relieves stress and helps people to bond. Strong fan engagement is commonly seen on college campuses where students will rally together behind their team.

All these effects are extremely vital to the way the industry operates. By knowing how key members of the industry are impacted, we can work to protect and ameliorate their lives. We can work to educate these young people on how to be safe and protect their interests. College athletics is a multi-billion-dollar industry that is only going to continue to expand over the coming years.

The Future and My Recommendations

As for the future, I foresee the relationship between social media and athletics only becoming stronger and more influential. However, there are multiple negative side effects that need to be addressed for the relationship between the two to be beneficial and healthy for those involved. Cancel culture is an extremely popular reaction people have when they disagree with another person's opinions or actions. Many athletes fear that sharing their own personal opinions will cause their current and potential fans to dislike and disassociate from them.

Another significant issue is the lack of definitive rules and regulations for college NIL deals. Because this is such a recent change, many teams, athletes, and agents do not know the proper channels for acquiring these deals. While the NCAA has begun to assess this problem, more work still needs to be done. I would suggest that the NCAA create rigid guidelines for the entire process of NIL deals. This would include who is exempt from offering brand deals, when

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

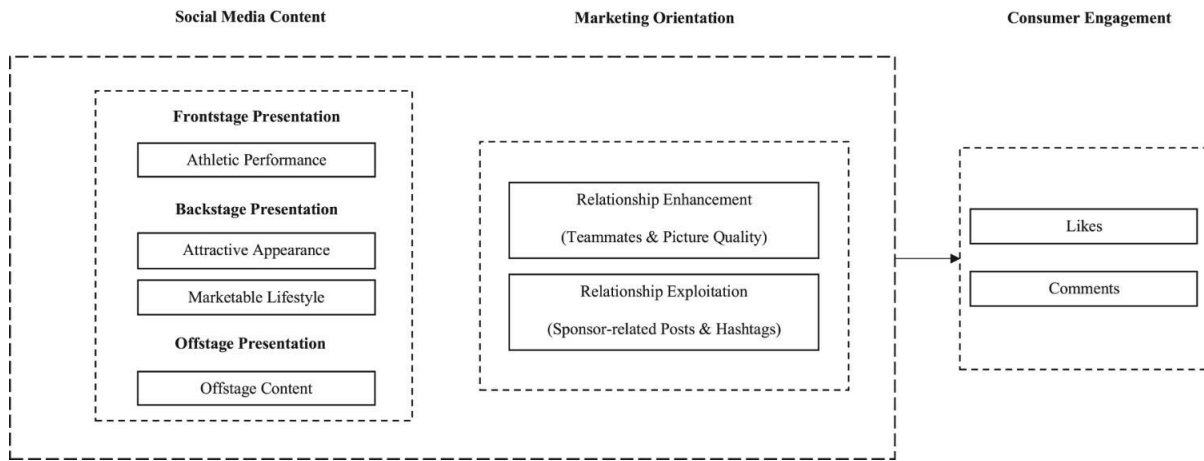
one can first meet with them, how one can contact them, what types of content an athlete can partake in, etc. In addition, I would also suggest that NIL training become mandatory upon enrolling as a student-athlete at any participating universities.

Regarding social media effects on female athletes, there isn't much within the college atmosphere that can alter these issues. Many of these issues are mainstream problems that affect all women regardless of their profession. The world can be cruel and judgmental and the only way to fix this issue is by teaching people to have compassion, especially on the internet since many people "hide behind the screen". This essentially means that people are willing to do and say things deemed inappropriate for in person situations. One way to combat the psychological effects is by teaching female athletes ways to deal with the stress caused by social media and how to create a healthy/positive mindset about their bodies and identities.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

Figure 1

Social Media Content



Source: Doyle (2023)

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

Figure 2

Follower & NIL Valuations

	Follower Count **	NIL Valuation
Arch Manning (#2)	225 thousand followers	\$3.8 million
Livvy Dunne (#3)	11.2 million followers	\$3.5 million

** Follower count includes Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.

Source: Nakos et al. (2023)

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

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SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ATHLETICS

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