

RESEARCH  
ARTICLE**From Admiration to Addiction: The Impact of Social Media Interaction on Psychological Anxiety among University Student Athletes****Toufik Ben Salem**

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Social media, psychological anxiety, student athletes, digital interaction, digital addiction.

**Abstract**

This study aims to explore the impact of interaction patterns on social media platforms on the level of psychological anxiety among university student athletes. A descriptive-analytical methodology with a mixed-methods approach was employed, collecting data from 300 active student athletes on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. The study focused on quantitative questionnaire analysis alongside content analysis of students' posts and comments to examine the relationship between digital interaction and psychological anxiety indicators. Results indicated a positive correlation between the frequency of digital interactions (likes, comments, shares) and levels of anxiety and psychological stress, with linguistic and emotional cues in the digital content reflecting states of psychological pressure and digital addiction. Additionally, the use of emoticons and specific expressions revealed recurring psychological tensions that deepen this relationship. The study confirms that intensive interaction within social media environments constitutes a significant psychological factor requiring awareness strategies and specialized psychological support for student athletes. These findings open new avenues for understanding the balance between healthy digital media use and mental health within the university sports community.

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**1. Introduction**

Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented rise in social media usage, especially among university youth, who increasingly rely on these platforms not only for entertainment or self-expression but also to follow sports content and interact with peers and the broader digital community. In this context, digital interaction—particularly through likes, comments, and shares—has become an integral part of the daily lives of university student athletes, reflecting intertwined psychological and social dimensions.

With this extensive engagement, worrying signs have emerged indicating a gradual shift from natural interaction to what can be described as "digital addiction" (Augustus, Zizzi, Voelker, & Costalupes, 2024), where the pace of use becomes excessive, and the interaction itself turns into a source of psychological stress (Ben Salem, The International tax journal Beyond human referees: The future of artificial intelligence in the FIFA World Cup 2026 between legitimacy and fan psychology, 2025). The student athlete, who ideally should balance physical activity with mental discipline, finds themselves confronting a new form of anxiety related to their digital image (Fiedler, Heidari, Birnkraut, & Kellmann, 2023), interaction frequency, and others' evaluations of their performance or presence in the virtual space (Guinto & Ang, 2025).

Despite the abundance of studies on social media's effects on students generally, university student athletes remain a largely overlooked group, particularly regarding the relationship between digital interaction intensity and psychological anxiety levels (Kuang, Liu, & Zhi, 2025). Does constant liking and continuous engagement with sports content transform into psychological pressure? Can interactions often viewed as encouragement produce adverse effects harming the mental health of student athletes? Based on these concerns, the following overarching research question is posed:

To what extent does repeated interaction on social media affect the psychological anxiety levels of university student athletes?

#### **Sub-questions:**

- What is the nature of social media use among university student athletes in terms of time, patterns, and interaction goals?
- What is the relationship between the intensity of interaction (likes, comments, shares) on social media and the psychological anxiety levels of student athletes?
- How do sports-related posts and comments on social media implicitly or explicitly express anxiety or psychological pressure?
- What are the most common symbols or phrases in student athletes' posts that indicate feelings of stress or addiction to interaction?

#### **General Hypothesis:**

Repeated social media interaction contributes to increased psychological anxiety among university student athletes.

#### **Sub-hypotheses:**

- Student athletes use social media at a high frequency, involving diverse interactive patterns that go beyond casual use.
- Frequent liking, commenting, and sharing of sports content is associated with escalating feelings of anxiety and psychological stress.
- The content of student athletes' posts displays linguistic and emotional signs reflecting recurring psychological preoccupation and tension resulting from continuous interaction.
- Emoticons and phrases used in student athletes' posts serve as clear indicators of psychological pressure and digital addiction.

This study aims to identify social media usage patterns among university student athletes, focusing on the relationship between digital interaction and their experience of psychological anxiety. It also seeks to analyze digital content to detect implicit psychological indicators within shared sports posts, aiming to understand the hidden dimensions of this interaction. Additionally, the study highlights the connection between excessive use of these platforms and increased psychological stress, while offering practical recommendations to alleviate anxiety within university sports environments.

The importance of this research lies in its focus on a distinctive student group—university athletes—who navigate a fragile balance between academic pressure, physical activity, and digital engagement. The study endeavors to understand the link between social media interaction and anxiety, a vital topic insufficiently explored within Arab contexts. This research opens the discussion on new aspects of digital mental health within the university setting.

Although there is extensive research on the psychological impact of social media on students, most studies focus on the general population without specifically addressing university athletes. Moreover, few studies combine quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine this phenomenon in the Arab context. This gap is precisely what the current study seeks to fill by providing a comprehensive descriptive-analytical approach that connects daily use, published content, and associated psychological feelings.

The study employs a descriptive-analytical methodology to understand the interplay between psychological and social phenomena as manifested in the daily lives of university student athletes. Two primary tools were adopted: a questionnaire to measure social media use patterns and anxiety levels, and content analysis to identify psychological and linguistic cues embedded in student posts. This dual approach aims to offer a precise and realistic scientific perspective on the impact of digital interaction on mental health, proposing practical strategies to help students achieve a healthy balance between their digital commitments and their academic and athletic lives.

## 2. Literature Review

The last decade has witnessed a significant increase in the use of social media among various youth groups, particularly within university settings. These platforms have become an integral part of daily life, offering opportunities for communication, self-expression, and continuous interaction. Numerous studies have indicated that intensive use of social media, especially among students, is associated with various psychological symptoms, most notably anxiety and stress stemming from social pressures and the ongoing comparisons embedded in digital interactions (Ben Salem, Khalfaoui, & Mazari, Algorithms on commercial editorial standards and sports audience rights in psychological content, 2025).

In the case of university athletes, this group is marked by a dual identity that merges academic and athletic dimensions, rendering them more vulnerable to psychological stress caused by the effort to balance athletic performance demands and social media engagement. Research suggests that student-athletes often participate heavily in online interactions—sharing achievements and engaging with their digital audiences—creating a persistent need for validation and visibility. This dynamic can lead to digital dependency and increased sensitivity to the approval or rejection cues conveyed through digital feedback (Li, Gong, Chen, & Ouyang, 2025).

Furthermore, studies in digital psychology have demonstrated that likes, comments, and shares extend beyond mere communication tools, often becoming instruments of self-assessment and emotional regulation, where satisfaction or frustration is shaped by the nature of the digital responses received (MA , et al., 2024). Such repeated engagement can contribute to chronic anxiety, particularly when students overly rely on these indicators for constructing their self-image.

From another angle, content analysis research indicates that sports-related posts and comments on social media frequently carry implicit psychological meanings—ranging from enthusiasm to pressure, or from challenge to exhaustion—thus providing rich material for identifying indirect psychological markers through the analysis of linguistic patterns, symbols, and expressions. Qualitative studies have also revealed that young users engage with social media not only to express themselves but also as an outlet for anxiety and emotions, either explicitly or through visual and linguistic cues (Martins, Branco, Martins, Santos, & Andrade, 2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on the relationship between social media use and mental health, studies focusing specifically on student-athletes remain limited, particularly in Arab contexts, and more so within the Algerian setting. Moreover, few studies have integrated both quantitative methods (e.g., surveys) and qualitative analyses of digital content, a methodological combination that is essential for understanding the phenomenon in its psychological, social, and symbolic dimensions.

In light of the above, there emerges a pressing need for a comprehensive study that links the patterns of social media use and interaction among university student-athletes with manifestations of psychological anxiety. Such a study should employ a multi-method approach to uncover both explicit and implicit indicators, offering a more in-depth and holistic understanding of the relationship between digital engagement and psychological dependency in the contemporary academic environment.

## 3. Methods and Materials

This study employed a descriptive-analytical approach using a mixed methods design, aiming to explore the relationship between patterns of interaction on social media and levels of psychological anxiety among university student-athletes. This methodological framework was chosen to integrate quantitative findings—collected through a structured questionnaire—with qualitative insights derived from content analysis of sports-related digital posts on various social media platforms.

The research was conducted during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year and involved a purposive sample of 300 university student-athletes, selected from sports-related disciplines in physical education

faculties across three Algerian universities. The inclusion criteria ensured that participants were regularly active on social media platforms and demonstrated noticeable engagement through posting or commenting on sports-related content.

The qualitative component of the study consisted of a thematic analysis of the content of students' posts and comments on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, focusing on contexts related to athletic performance or everyday university life.

A 22-item questionnaire was developed, structured around two main dimensions:

- **Dimension 1 (H1):** Patterns of social media use and digital interaction (time spent, nature of interaction, frequency, and reliance on likes).
- **Dimension 2 (H2):** Indicators of psychological anxiety linked to digital interaction (feelings of comparison, post-publication stress, obsessive thoughts related to approval or rejection).

A four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree – Agree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree) was used to measure student responses. To ensure clarity and ease of understanding, the questionnaire was piloted on a preliminary sample of 30 student-athletes.

**Table 01: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients**

Instrument Component	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Total Questionnaire	22	0.87
Social Media Use	12	0.84
Psychological Anxiety	10	0.85

These values indicate a high level of internal consistency and acceptable reliability for the instrument used to assess psychological and social variables.

For the qualitative content analysis, a coding framework was developed with four major indicators to identify psychological patterns in digital content:

1. **Emotional content** (e.g., expressions of stress, frustration, excitement, or anxiety).
2. **Implicit psychological language** (e.g., comparison, downplaying, anticipation, need for validation).
3. **Use of emojis** (e.g., 😊, 😢, 😡, 😞) and the frequency of their appearance in psychologically relevant contexts.
4. **Indirect social cues** (e.g., excessive apologizing, seeking group approval, hints at rejection or neglect).

The thematic inductive coding method was applied to a corpus of 200 posts and comments, carefully selected in adherence to ethical standards ensuring content owners' privacy and confidentiality. The analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software for qualitative data.

Quantitative data analysis was performed using SPSS, and included:

- **Frequencies and percentages** to describe general patterns.
- **Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests** to examine statistical differences between variables.

#### 4. Results

##### Analysis and Discussion of Hypotheses

##### Hypothesis 1

University student-athletes use social media at a high frequency, characterized by diverse interactive patterns that go beyond passive browsing.

**Table 02: Levels of Social Media Use and Interaction Patterns among Student-Athletes**

Level of Use	Frequency	Percentage	$\chi^2$ Value	df	$\alpha$	p-value	Statistical Significance
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Low	36	12.0%	49.37	2	0.05	0.000	Statistically Significant
Moderate	102	34.0%					
High	162	54.0%					
Total	300	100%	Critical $\chi^2 = 13.82$				

The results indicate that more than half of student-athletes (54%) reported high levels of social media use, with active interaction modes including likes, comments, and shares. Moderate usage accounted for 34%, while only 12% reported low engagement.

The Chi-square test revealed a statistically significant difference ( $\chi^2 = 49.37 > 13.82$ ;  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ), supporting the hypothesis that student-athletes do not merely browse social media casually but engage in active and frequent interaction.

These findings highlight the central role of digital platforms in student-athletes' daily lives. Their use of social media for expressing athletic performance, sharing achievements, and interacting with audiences demonstrates deep integration into the digital interaction culture (Yue, Zhang, Zhang, & Schinke, 2025).

### Hypothesis 2

The frequency of likes, comments, and shares on sports-related content is associated with increased levels of anxiety and psychological tension.

**Table 03: Relationship Between Digital Interaction and Psychological Anxiety Among Student-Athletes**

Level of Anxiety	Frequency	Percentage	$\chi^2$ Value	df	$\alpha$	p-value	Statistical Significance
Low	39	13.0%	57.28	2	0.05	0.000	Statistically Significant
Moderate	111	37.0%					
High	150	50.0%					
Total	300	100%	Critical $\chi^2 = 13.82$				

The data reveal that 50% of participants experienced high levels of psychological anxiety related to frequent engagement with sports content on social media, while 37% reported moderate levels and only 13% reported low anxiety.

The high Chi-square value ( $\chi^2 = 57.28$ ) and the very low p-value ( $p = 0.000$ ) confirm a statistically significant relationship between digital interaction and anxiety levels among student-athletes.

These findings suggest that the pressure to engage, the need for positive feedback (likes, comments), and fear of judgment contribute to psychological strain. In a social media environment heavily influenced by performance and social comparison, such factors become particularly relevant for student-athletes (Wang & Shang, 2024).

This aligns with psychological theories indicating that excessive use of social networking sites can trigger patterns of negative thinking or social anxiety—especially in competitive contexts or where self-worth is closely tied to digital validation.

### Hypothesis 3:

The content of university student-athletes' posts reveals linguistic and emotional cues that reflect psychological preoccupation and recurring stress resulting from continuous interaction.

**Table 04: Emotional-Psychological Indicators in the Content of Student-Athletes' Posts**

Psychological Indicator	Frequency	Relative Frequency (%)	Examples from Posts	Potential Psychological Implication
Tension and Anxiety	86	33%	"My stress is through the roof after the match," "I couldn't sleep"	Excessive preoccupation and persistent stress linked to performance and comparison
Social Comparison	68	24%	"They're all better than me," "Look at their stats [ ]"	Feelings of inadequacy and self-devaluation

Overthinking	59	19.5%	“I think every day about what people think of my post”	Disturbed self-assessment, obsession with social approval
Overexcitement/Exaggeration	47	13.5%	“I’m always the best ☺”	Attempt to assert self-worth, compensatory expression
Frustration and Withdrawal	40	10%	“It’s pointless,” “I just want to isolate for a while”	Indicators of sustained psychological pressure, low adaptability

The results indicate that over one-third (33%) of the digital content analyzed contains linguistic and emotional expressions of psychological tension and anxiety resulting from continuous engagement with social media platforms. A notable portion (24%) of the content shows signs of social comparison, where students evaluate themselves unfavorably against others, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and digital self-image anxiety.

Additionally, 19.5% of posts reflected compulsive cognitive patterns associated with digital interaction, revealing a psychological attachment to audience reactions and published content. This suggests a direct link between high-frequency social media use and emotional distress (Toufik & Aissa, Youth Interest In Creating Sports Content On Youtube As A Profitable Activity: A Survey Study On A Sample Of Youtube Users, 2024).

These findings support Hypothesis 3, as content analysis clearly shows that student-athletes use social platforms not only for entertainment or information but also as spaces for constant self-evaluation, resulting in heightened psychological stress related to performance, engagement, and digital self-representation.

#### Hypothesis 4:

Emojis and phrases used in student-athletes’ posts serve as clear indicators of psychological pressure and signs of digital addiction.

**Table 05: Emojis and Their Psychological/Social Significance in Student Content**

Emoji	Frequency	Psychological and Social Implication
☹	88	Hesitation, embarrassment, anxiety about evaluation or failure
☹	61	Sadness, feelings of rejection or exclusion
👁	55	Constant monitoring, tension from fear of judgment
💪	52	Psychological compensation, asserting competence amid stress
🔄	44	Frequent refreshing, sign of digital addiction and fixation

**Table 06: Phrases Indicating Addiction and Psychological Stress**

Linguistic Pattern	Examples from Posts	Frequency (%)	Psychological Indication
Digital Urgency	“I have to post every day,” “I couldn’t stop scrolling TikTok”	28%	Compulsive attachment, loss of usage control
Excessive Self-Affirmation	“Look at my achievement,” “You must see my latest goal”	22%	Repeated need for external validation, linked to low self-esteem
Anxiety About Engagement	“Why didn’t anyone react?”, “Maybe they didn’t like my post”	20%	Psychological fragility stemming from dependency on likes
Time-Based Repetition	“I spent 4 hours reading comments,” “I check every minute”	30%	Clear sign of digital addiction and impaired time control

The findings show that certain emojis—particularly ☹, ☹, and 👁—are frequently used in contexts associated with psychological pressure and compulsive preoccupation. These symbolic expressions serve as indirect indicators of stress and anxiety, consistent with digital-era modes of emotional communication.

Furthermore, recurring linguistic patterns in posts reveal strong signs of digital addiction, with a significant presence of language that reflects obsessive attachment to social platforms—both in terms of time spent and the need for constant engagement and validation.

These results confirm Hypothesis 4, demonstrating that the emojis and phrases used by student-athletes represent both qualitative and quantitative indicators of persistent psychological stress, fueled by continuous digital interaction and self-monitoring. The data also show that these are not isolated incidents but rather widespread



psychosocial phenomena within the digital content generated by this group (Kuang, Liu , & Zhi, 2025; Toufik, Some Basic Psychological Traits For Amateur Algerian Football Players, 2023).

Both Hypotheses 3 and 4 clearly illustrate the intense emotional and psychological dimension of social media use among university student-athletes. Thematic analysis reveals that despite the seemingly entertaining or performance-oriented nature of their content, digital interaction conceals patterns of stress, emotional preoccupation, and addictive behaviors that significantly affect mental well-being.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study, titled "The Impact of Social Media Interaction on Psychological Anxiety among University Student-Athletes," shed new light on the complex relationship between intensive digital engagement and the psychological and social dynamics of student-athletes within the highly demanding context of university life, which blends academic and athletic responsibilities. This relationship was explored through a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing survey tools to monitor indicators of psychological anxiety related to social media interaction, in addition to content analysis of students' digital posts to uncover latent emotional and linguistic cues.

The survey data revealed that a significant proportion of student-athletes experience varying degrees of anxiety associated with their intensive use of social media, particularly when engaging with feedback such as likes, comments, and shares. This is manifested through feelings of tension, ongoing comparisons with peers, and concern over how their content is perceived by online audiences (Pandey, Mohanty, & Najafov , 2025). These findings provide strong support for the second hypothesis, which posits a correlation between the frequency of digital interaction and the emergence of psychological strain and mental preoccupation.

Content analysis of student posts further revealed that the language employed in their digital communication frequently includes indirect psychological indicators. The third hypothesis highlighted the presence of emotional and linguistic signals suggestive of internal tension or a desire for recognition and social acceptance. Phrases such as "I hope for success," "I couldn't sleep," or emojis like 🤔 and 😞 reflect underlying anxiety and psychological pressure that may not be explicitly expressed (Huang, Lv, & Zeng , 2025). This form of indirect expression provides a powerful lens for uncovering the unspoken psychological dimensions of digital interaction.

Moreover, the fourth hypothesis confirmed that the use of emojis and repetitive expressions in students' posts is indicative of psychological pressure and digital dependency. It was observed that some student-athletes post content compulsively (Ng MD, Sanders MD, Merrill MD, & Faustin , 2024), often expressing sentiments such as "I can't stay away," or "I need engagement." Emojis denoting excessive enthusiasm (🔥), anxiety (😰), and habituation (🔄) were frequently used, suggesting a deep emotional and behavioral attachment to digital platforms that may develop into psychological dependency over time ( Toufik & Aissa , Youth Interest In Creating Sports Content On Youtube As A Profitable Activity A Survey Study On A Sample Of Youtube Users, 2024).

When synthesizing the results across all four hypotheses, it becomes evident that digital interaction constitutes more than just a social activity—it is a complex psychological experience where self-perception is shaped and continually assessed through virtual feedback. Given the dual demands of academic achievement and athletic performance (Kuang, Liu , & Zhi, 2025), student-athletes appear especially vulnerable to the emotional consequences of social media engagement, particularly when it evolves into a mirror reflecting their sense of self-worth.

Accordingly, the general hypothesis of the study—that a significant relationship exists between social media interaction and psychological anxiety among university student-athletes—is strongly supported by both quantitative and qualitative findings (Wang & Shang, 2024). The digital space functions not only as a social platform but as a psychologically influential environment that can intensify anxiety when used unconsciously or excessively.

These results underscore the urgent need for digital psychological support programs within university settings. Such initiatives should emphasize healthy social media practices and help student-athletes in particular to achieve a sustainable balance between their digital presence and the demands of daily life. Additionally, integrating psychological and social development into university guidance policies is essential, especially as digital technologies become more deeply embedded in student life.

## 6. Conclusion

In light of the findings presented in this study, “From Likes to Addiction: The Impact of Social Media Interaction on Psychological Anxiety among University Student-Athletes,” it is clear that the analysis goes beyond surface-level descriptions of student-athletes’ relationship with social media. Instead, it delves into the psychological and social dynamics underlying this interaction within the context of a university-athletic environment that requires a delicate balance between physical competition, academic success, and psychological well-being.

Results derived from both quantitative and qualitative approaches reveal that social media engagement has transcended the realm of entertainment or communication. It has become a psychologically demanding space, characterized by the need for recognition, fear of comparison, and a persistent pursuit of social validation. The examined hypotheses collectively demonstrate a positive correlation between excessive interaction—measured in time, frequency, and reliance on approval metrics—and indicators of psychological anxiety. This is particularly salient in a digital environment that rewards visibility and penalizes absence.

The content analysis of students’ posts further exposed cumulative psychological and emotional tensions, expressed through implicit language and symbolic emojis that reveal hidden stress, internal confusion, and a constant urge to affirm the self in a competitive and judgment-driven digital culture. As such, psychological anxiety is no longer merely a situational reaction but, in some cases, a product of a digitally sustained lifestyle.

By integrating rigorous statistical analysis with digital content examination, this study moves beyond a linear understanding of the relationship between digital engagement and mental health. It presents a more nuanced interpretive framework for understanding how daily interaction through social media impacts the psychological architecture of student-athletes. The study's outcomes support the general hypothesis, confirming that intensive social media engagement contributes to the development of anxiety symptoms among this group, especially in the absence of digital literacy or specialized psychological support.

This research, therefore, opens up new academic and practical avenues. It advocates for the development of digital mental health support programs in universities and the implementation of targeted awareness-raising strategies for student-athletes, aimed at fostering mindful use of technology and restoring balance between digital presence and real-life responsibilities.

In closing, it must be emphasized that today’s university athlete is not solely a performing body, but also a thinking mind and a reacting psyche—engaged in multiple environments, both digital and physical. Any modern approach to athlete development must acknowledge the pivotal role of digital engagement in shaping psychological balance and social behavior. This study, with its findings and recommendations, marks an initial step toward a renewed awareness of this evolving relationship and calls for further interdisciplinary research that bridges psychology, sociology, and sports education to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this growing phenomenon.

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