

**Exploring the Double-Edged Nature of Social Media During  
Student-Athlete Injury Recovery and the Need for Digital Wellness: A  
Community-Based Project**

by

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# PROJECT REVIEW INFORMATION

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## Master of Education (MEd)

**Project title:** Exploring the Double-Edged Nature of Social Media During Student-Athlete Injury Recovery and the Need for Digital Wellness: A Community-Based Project

The Project was approved on November 11th, 2025, by the following review committee:

### Review Committee:

Research Supervisor

Dr. Jennifer Laffier

Second Reader

Dr. Barb Perry

The above review committee determined that the Project is acceptable in form and content, and that a satisfactory knowledge of the field was demonstrated in the work submitted. A copy of the Certificate of Approval is available from the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

This Master's project was conducted through the Mental Health in the Digital Age (MHDA) Research Lab at Ontario Tech University, Frazer Faculty of Education. The project consisted of two phases:

1. Literature Review – A comprehensive literature review was conducted to explore the dual role of social media in adolescent student-athletes' post-injury recovery and to identify digital wellness needs and strategies.
2. Knowledge Mobilization – Based on the findings of the literature review, a series of knowledge mobilization artifacts were created to share insights with community stakeholders. These artifacts include a community workshop, a blog, and a pre-recorded webinar.

These sessions aimed to bridge the gap between research and practice by informing educators, coaches, parents, and community members about the psychological impacts of social media on injured adolescent student-athletes and the importance of digital wellness strategies in supporting recovery.

This project demonstrates the value of combining academic research with community-based knowledge mobilization to address emerging challenges in adolescent mental health, sport, and digital culture.

## **ABSTRACT**

Adolescent student-athletes face unique challenges balancing sport, academics, and identity development during a critical stage of growth. These challenges often intensify after injury, disrupting physical activity, self-concept, and mental well-being. Social media, a central part of adolescent life, plays a complex role in recovery, offering both mental health benefits and risks. This multi-phase research project examined how social media use influences injured adolescent student-athletes and identified digital wellness needs. Phase one reviewed the literature on benefits, such as social support, transition assistance, and access to health information, as well as risks, such as negative commentary, identity loss, and social comparison. Findings highlight the need to integrate digital wellness education into athletic programs through healthy online support networks, transition support, mindfulness, and stigma reduction. Future research should explore interventions that help student-athletes manage recovery in the digital age. Phase two involved community workshops and webinars to share findings with athletes, parents, and coaches.

**Keywords:** student-athlete; injury; sports injury; sports; social media; adolescent mental health; digital wellness; high school; post-secondary; athletes in school

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this project consists of original work that I have authored. This is a true copy of the work, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my committee.

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Samantha Pereira da Silva

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this project to all adolescent student-athletes who inspire me daily with their hard work, resilience, and determination. Watching young athletes navigate the challenges of sport reminds me of the powerful lessons that athletics provide, especially during these formative years. No matter where their careers may take them, the discipline and character they build will serve them throughout life. This project also represents my commitment to supporting their growth, wellness, and success not only as athletes, but as individuals. I hope this work will guide those who may experience a significant injury or setback in their athletic journey, offering digital wellness strategies to help them cope and thrive in today's digital age.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Laffier, for her guidance and support throughout this research and project. Her expertise and mentorship not only shaped this work but also enabled me to be part of the Mental Health in the Digital Age research lab, where I could share and refine my ideas in a supportive, collaborative environment.

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To my husband, thank you for your patience and constant encouragement during this process. Your support has been a source of strength throughout my studies.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my gym community, CrossFit Barrie, who continue to inspire me every day with their dedication to fitness and health. Their commitment to growth and wellness has been both a motivation for this project and a reminder of the power of community.

## **STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS**

### **Sole Authorship**

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this work and that no part of this work has been published or submitted for publication. I have used standard referencing practices to acknowledge ideas, research techniques, or other materials that belong to others. Furthermore, I hereby certify that I am the sole source of the creative works and inventive knowledge described in this document.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS**

MHDA	Mental Health Digital Age
AIMS	Athletic Identity Measurement Scale
ACL	Anterior Cruciate Ligament
CBT	Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy
P-DW	Psychological Digital Wellness
AFL	Australian Football League
ATD	Athlete Transition Director
KMb	Knowledge Mobilization

# **Exploring the Role of Social Media Use During Student-Athlete Injury Recovery and the Need for Digital Wellness: A Community Project**

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview of Project**

The Mental Health in the Digital Age Lab is a research hub that explores the impacts on human development and learning. The lab focuses on ‘research-to-practice’ and knowledge mobilization, which involves translating research into actionable work that communities can use to support their mental health. In 2024, the author joined the research team following the completion of the Mental Health in Schools graduate course with Dr. Jennifer Laffier.

In 2022, the Lab's research team began a project exploring the impacts of social media use across various populations. As a member of the research lab, the author was invited to join the research project to explore the specific population of student-athletes who experience injuries and their social media use. This topic held relevance for the author, given her extensive background in sport as a competitive athlete, gym owner, and coach. Through years of competing at a high level in both team and individual sports, the author has developed a strong understanding of the physical and psychological demands associated with athletic identity and injury. The author's experience as a gym owner, coach, and educator has further enabled her to support athletes through recovery, offering a valuable perspective on how social media influences their emotional experiences, identity, and coping mechanisms during these times.

The goal of this project was to research how adolescent student-athletes use social media during injury recovery, specifically examining the benefits and risks to their mental health, and provide digital wellness recommendations for healthy social media use. There were several steps to the project, including 1) completing a literature review to examine the benefits and risks of social media use, 2) developing recommendations for digital wellness, 3) creating knowledge mobilization artifacts from the report for communities, including workshops and webinars, and 4) developing the paper into journal or chapter publications.

The author offered to lead the project focused on adolescent student-athletes and social media use as part of her M.Ed. program and worked on it from January to October 2025. The author attended lab research meetings, collected and analyzed sources for her specific review, and designed and delivered community workshops and webinars. This document highlights the literature review paper, the knowledge mobilization artifacts created for this project and the next steps.

Chapter One provides an overview of adolescent student-athlete participation in sports, highlighting the benefits of sports, the development of athletic identity, the risks associated with sport-related injuries, available support, and the importance of digital wellness. It also presents the research purpose and guiding research questions. Chapter Two outlines the methodology, including the inclusion criteria, information sources, search terms, and data analysis procedures. Chapter Three presents the key themes identified in the literature, focusing on the mental health benefits and risks of social media use among adolescent student-athletes. Chapter Four discusses the relevance of these findings, offering digital wellness recommendations to promote healthy social

media use during injury recovery, conclusions, and suggests directions for future research. Finally, Chapter Five provides an overview of the knowledge mobilization activities completed as part of this project and outlines the proposed next steps.

## **1.2 Adolescent Engagement in Sports**

According to the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (2024), approximately 68% of Canadian adolescents participate in sports. Across Canada, there is a wide variety of sports that adolescents can become involved in depending on the season, including Canada's two national sports, lacrosse and hockey (Government of Canada, 2025). Some adolescents participate in multiple sports as leisure activities, while others gravitate towards one, choosing a 'sport specialization' (single-sport participation) (Iona et al., 2022; Jayanthi et al., 2013). Adolescent student-athletes in high school may transition to university or college to compete in these specialized sports. In some cases, they seek scholarships at Canadian or American post-secondary institutions. At the Canadian university level, approximately 15,500 post-secondary students participate in U SPORTS athletics, the national governing body for university sports (U SPORTS, 2024). This number represents student-athletes competing in sports ranging from football and basketball to swimming and track and field at the university level (Owen, 2024; U SPORTS, 2024).

## **1.3 The Wellness Benefits of Sports**

Participation in sports offers numerous health benefits for adolescents, including improved cardiovascular health and reduced risk of obesity and diabetes (Merkel, 2013). Being active in sports also reduces screen time in children and adolescents (Balcombe &

De Leo, 2020). This is important, as children and adolescents now spend an average of 7.5 hours per day on screens, which can negatively impact their physical, psychological, and social health (Canadian Pediatric Society, Digital Health Task Force, 2019).

Additionally, research suggests that adolescents who participate in sports are less likely to engage in health-risk behaviours (e.g., substance use, poor eating habits) than non-athletes (Merkel, 2013; Pate et al., 2000).

Participation in individual and team sports can benefit social and psychological health. For example, participation in organized sport during childhood and adolescence is associated with higher levels of self-esteem, greater social skills, and fewer depressive symptoms (Eime et al., 2013; Vella et al., 2017). Vella et al. (2017) also found that sport participation and mental health are bidirectionally related, with emotional well-being influencing sustained sport involvement. Mills et al. (2019) found that the social and mental health benefits of participation in sport exceed those achieved through other leisure-time or recreational activities. These findings align with the “Mental Health Through Sport” model, which explains how sport participation fosters psychological well-being by promoting social connectedness, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction (Eather et al., 2023). However, student-athletes must learn to balance the demands of competitive sports and academic responsibilities. If not, this can lead to negative mental health impacts, such as stress and anxiety (Brenner et al., 2019).

#### **1.4. The ‘Athlete Identity’**

According to developmental theorists Erik Erikson (1959) and James Marcia (1966), the period of identity formation, when individuals integrate their self-

understanding, values, goals, and behaviours into a coherent and stable sense of self, is a central developmental task of adolescence. Constructing a meaningful identity through exploration provides resilience and promotes adaptive functioning (Marcia, 1966). However, failure to do so can result in role confusion, impacting their sense of belonging and direction in society (Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966; McLeod, 2023).

For many adolescent student-athletes, sports play a significant role in their identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Jakum, 2023). Research suggests that adolescents who choose 'sports specialization' often develop an 'athletic identity', defined as the extent to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Brewer et al. (1993) suggest that individuals with strong athletic identities are more likely to engage in greater sport participation and to hold higher expectations for their own and others' behaviour.

However, sport specialization and strong athletic identities may cause adolescents to isolate themselves by eliminating non-primary sport involvement (Jayanthi et al., 2013). This can lead to identity foreclosure in adolescence, in which individuals firmly commit to a single identity without exploring alternative roles or interests (Marcia, 1966). Research by Petitpas and France (2012) indicated that athletes are particularly at risk for identity foreclosure due to the demands of sport participation and the emphasis on conformity and compliance within sport environments, which can limit their ability or desire to explore other aspects of identity. Similarly, McQuown, Linnemeyer, and Brown (2010) found that athletes who closely tied their self-worth to athletic performance experienced greater identity foreclosure and greater emotional distress following adverse sport outcomes than their non-athlete peers.

Brewer et al. (1993) identified three subfactors of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS): social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity. Social identity reflects the personal connection and self-concept an individual has as an athlete. Exclusivity captures the extent to which an individual's identity is limited to the athletic role, while negative affectivity represents the emotional responses associated with performance setbacks or injury. Understanding athletic identity and its subfactors provides valuable insight into the athlete's mindset, which can inform motivational strategies for coaches and individualized injury prevention or rehabilitation approaches for healthcare providers.

### **1.5 Sports Injuries and Identity**

It is estimated that approximately 90% of student-athletes will sustain at least one sport-related injury during their athletic careers (Sullivan et al., 2022). These injuries vary in severity, ranging from minor conditions such as sprains and bruising to more serious injuries like ligament tears, fractures, dislocations, and concussions. Among the most common severe injuries in high school and collegiate sports is the Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) tear, which frequently requires surgical reconstruction. Many athletes undergoing this procedure report difficulty returning to their pre-injury performance levels (Gompels et al., 2024; Slater et al., 2019). Concussions are also prevalent, particularly in contact sports, and pose unique risks due to their potential long-term neurological effects (McCrory et al., 2017).

Several factors can increase an athlete's susceptibility to injury, including early single-sport specialization and high training volumes (Carder et al., 2020). While a direct

link between athletic identity and injury incidence has not been established, student-athletes who strongly identify with their sport may overtrain or neglect recovery, inadvertently heightening their injury risk (Brewer et al., 1993; Myer et al., 2015). Brenner (2016) cautions that early sport specialization and intensive training can lead to both overuse injuries and psychological burnout.

Injuries can significantly disrupt not only an athlete's physical performance but also their psychological well-being. Adolescent student-athletes face unique vulnerabilities due to the developmental importance of identity formation and peer acceptance (Jakum, 2023; World Health Organization, 2024). When injuries interrupt participation in sports, they often trigger emotional responses such as isolation, frustration, and fear of losing one's athletic identity. These effects are compounded in cases of long-term or season-ending injuries, where athletes may experience disconnection from teammates, a diminished sense of purpose, and a shift in self-concept (Rogers et al., 2024).

A student-athlete's identification with their sport plays a critical role in how they respond to injury. For many, sport is a central aspect of self-definition, and the sudden loss of this role can lead to emotional distress, including depression, anxiety, grief, and in some cases, symptoms of traumatic stress (Clement et al., 2015; Jakum, 2023). Athletes may internalize negative beliefs about their injury, viewing it as career-threatening or as a personal failure. For example, Gilbert's (2019) study of a Division I athlete highlighted identity disruption as a primary emotional stressor during rehabilitation, marked by feelings of detachment from both the body and team. Recent research by Choudhury et al.

(2024) further highlights that strong athletic identity can heighten vulnerability to psychological distress and injury risk.

These psychological challenges can hinder recovery if left unaddressed. Sparkes (1998) emphasizes that disruptions to athletic identity may decrease motivation and engagement in rehabilitation, especially if the athlete becomes emotionally demoralized. In addition, student-athletes with high levels of athletic identity are at greater risk of identity foreclosure, leaving little room for other interests or roles (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). This dynamic can intensify post-injury distress, particularly among adolescents who are still developing a broader sense of identity and future direction (McLeod, 2023; Rogers et al., 2024).

## **1.6 Support During Injury Recovery**

Despite the difficulties associated with sports injuries, several protective factors can help adolescent student-athletes navigate the recovery process. A strong social support network, including coaches, teammates, family members, and mental health professionals, has been shown to promote resilience and improve psychological outcomes (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Psychological interventions, such as Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), goal-setting, and imagery, can further assist athletes in managing emotional stress and maintaining engagement in rehabilitation (Podlog et al., 2015).

Literature on adolescent student-athletes' mental health and injury recovery suggests that there are skills that can enhance their ability to cope effectively with injury, mitigating mental health struggles (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020; Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021; Putukian, 2016). These essential skills include emotional and self-regulation, self-

awareness, and coping skills, all of which contribute to resilience during the injury recovery process (Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021). Encouraging adolescent student-athletes to cultivate a more balanced identity, one that includes academics, social relationships, and other interests outside of sport, can reduce the psychological burden of injury and mitigate the risk of identity foreclosure. Additionally, integrating mental health resources into athletic programs and normalizing emotional responses to injury can create a more supportive and inclusive recovery environment.

Given adolescents' digital lives, other forms of support should be explored, particularly technology-based support. For example, some adolescents may turn to social media more during an injury due to boredom, need for information, or help-seeking content (Barry et al., 2024).

### **1.7 The Need to Examine the Role of Social Media and Digital Wellness**

Social media has become an integral part of adolescents' lives, shaping their interactions, providing instant access to information, and serving as both a source of support and potential risk (Mayo Clinic, 2023; World Health Organization, 2025). According to Vogels et al. (2022), 95% of adolescents aged 13 to 17 report using social media platforms, with more than a third reporting almost constant use. While these platforms can foster connection, encouragement, and educational opportunities, they also pose risks, including social comparison, anxiety, and cyberbullying, all of which can negatively impact mental health (Sullivan et al., 2022).

Social media also presents student-athletes with both benefits and risks. For example, social media use during major sporting events was found to provide social

support but also act as a distraction (Hayes et al., 2020). A significant risk identified in the research was adolescent student-athletes using social media in ways that fostered unhealthy comparisons with others (Udelf, 2023). Udelf, a sports psychologist, stated, “Social media can grease the slippery slide of comparison misery, especially in the sports world. It is a breeding ground for destructive comparison amongst athletes of all ages” (Udelf, 2023, para. 3). A 17-year-old high school senior and student-athlete who participates on two varsity teams was interviewed by Udelf and stated,

“Social media can ruin a player’s confidence. When you scroll through Twitter and see other kids that you used to play with, and the way that their coaches talk about them. Then you start playing the comparison game. It’s a big way players can look at a kid who had a good weekend compared to a weekend that may not have been a good one for you and think, 'Are they really much better than me?' Social media can promote a player, but I definitely think it can ruin a player” (para. 13).

## **1.8 Digital Wellness**

The dual nature of social media has led to calls for digital wellness among adolescents (Dienlin & Johannes, 2020; Laffier et al., 2025). Digital wellness is an emerging concept that has gained attention in recent years, particularly as technology use has become increasingly intertwined with adolescent development and health behaviours (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020; World Health Organization, 2024). Adolescents themselves have expressed strong interest in using digital tools to support mental health and self-regulation, emphasizing that online programs and apps can make mental health resources

more accessible and relatable when designed with their input (Montague et al., 2015). From a psychological perspective, digital wellness is a life skill that involves cultivating positive, balanced relationships with technology to facilitate flourishing in the online realm (Burr et al., 2020; Dennis & Ziliotti, 2023; Laffier et al., 2025). Intentional and balanced use of technology and digital platforms can support mental, emotional, and physical well-being, and minimize risk such as overuse, social comparison, and digital stress (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020; World Health Organization, 2024). Understanding the benefits and risks is key to healthy social media use.

The Psychological Digital Wellness (P-DW) model by Laffier et al. (2025) frames digital wellness as a lifelong, evolving process, recognizing that individuals' digital needs and habits shift across developmental stages. For instance, adolescents' digital wellness needs differ from those of adults. The model also proposes that digital wellness is a cyclical process requiring the development of key skills. It begins with mental health literacy, which allows people to assess their well-being and the signs and symptoms of mental health issues. Skills such as emotional intelligence, self-reflection, mindfulness, and critical thinking are crucial for recognizing and assessing healthy technology use. This leads to an application in which one chooses appropriate actions for healthy technology use and methods to mitigate risks and reap benefits. This step of the cyclical process requires strong self-regulation and emotional regulation skills, as impulse control and effective coping mechanisms are essential for managing technology use in purposeful and meaningful ways, while minimizing potential negative consequences. People should continually evaluate their relationship with technology to determine whether they are

using effective strategies to support their wellness. This evaluation brings us back to gaining more knowledge and starting the cyclical process all over again.

## **1.9 Research Purpose**

The intersection of social media and the sports world is still in its relative infancy (Carter et al., 2021). However, understanding the dual impact of social media on adolescent student-athletes during injury recovery is essential for developing effective digital wellness strategies that foster psychological resilience and overall well-being. Digital wellness strategies that student-athletes, coaches, parents, schools, and teams can apply or share can help create healthy communities and athletes. Therefore, this research project aimed to understand the benefits and risks of social media use and the potential need for digital wellness among adolescent student athletes, ages 14-24 (grade 9 to post-secondary), during injury recovery.

The MHDA research lab's mission is to provide education and resources to communities that improve mental health and well-being. A key focus is digital wellness strategies that can be shared with community stakeholders through knowledge mobilization efforts such as workshops, webinars, and information reports. This project was part of that initiative, focusing on digital wellness strategies for adolescent student-athletes who use social media during injury recovery.

To accomplish this, a preliminary literature review was needed. The specific research questions were 1) *What mental health benefits and risks does social media play for adolescent student-athletes during injury recovery?* And 2) *What digital wellness*

*strategies can support adolescent student-athletes in maintaining healthy social media use during injury recovery?*

Both lived experiences and research were important. This information would help develop ideas for digital wellness strategies that adolescent student-athletes can apply to support their well-being, especially during injury recovery. Understanding the role social media plays in the mental health of student-athletes is critical for parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and coaches who work with injured student-athletes and seek to implement supportive digital wellness initiatives.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

To address the research questions, a literature review examined the mental health benefits and risks of social media use among adolescent student-athletes during injury recovery, and identified digital wellness strategies to support healthy, balanced social media engagement throughout the recovery process. The goal of a literature review is to gather and synthesize primary research relevant to the specific predetermined questions (Calderon Martinez et al., 2023; Pollock & Berge, 2017). Addressing these questions through a synthesis of existing literature provides a foundation for practical applications in adolescent student-athletes' mental health, digital wellness, and sports recovery. By analyzing current studies, the review generates actionable insights to inform practical recommendations (Snyder, 2023).

Due to time constraints and the project's preliminary focus, a narrative review approach was used. This approach was selected because it is flexible and suitable for synthesizing diverse forms of evidence, including empirical studies, news articles, and

personal reports such as blogs, to provide a comprehensive overview within a limited timeframe (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Sukhera, 2022). Narrative reviews aim not to include every article ever published on a topic but to integrate multiple perspectives to draw plausible conclusions and inform theoretical or practical frameworks (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Snyder, 2023). This was appropriate given the study's role in a larger project focused on developing knowledge mobilization artifacts. The review process involved clarifying the research goals and methods, describing the rationale for the chosen approach, setting the scope and definitions, locating suitable research through defined inclusion criteria and search terms, gathering and assessing the quality of the data, and synthesizing and interpreting the evidence (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Pollock & Berge, 2017; Sukhera, 2022). This flexible approach enabled the author to present the available evidence authentically and to draw informed assumptions about the relationship between social media use, digital wellness, and athlete mental health.

## **2.1 Inclusion Criteria**

The first step was to define the inclusion criteria (Pollock & Berge, 2017). Since the topic of interest was adolescent student-athletes experiencing injuries and social media use, the research initially focused on those aged 14-24 (grade 9 to post-secondary). To be included, the literature had to discuss social media use by adolescent student-athletes during injury. Both theoretical and empirical academic research were reviewed, as well as lived experiences and opinions shared through other media, such as articles and news reports.

An initial scan revealed limited literature focused specifically on adolescent student-athletes; therefore, the search was expanded to include studies examining adult athletes aged 25 and older and their use of social media during injury recovery. The literature defines adolescents and adults across varying age ranges; therefore, including adults ensured a comprehensive review of all relevant studies on student-athletes. The literature had to provide insights into the mental health benefits and risks of social media use during injury recovery or by athletes at risk of injury. Other eligible criteria included literature written in English and published between 2010 and 2025, to account for the popularity and growth of social media over the last 15 years. Included were chapter and journal publications, government or agency reports, community studies, and media reports, especially sports media, since they could provide valuable insights into athletes' lived experiences.

## **Table 1**

### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for the Literature Review*

#### Inclusion Criteria

---

Focused on student-athletes experiencing injury and their social media use.

Age range - primary search was adolescents aged 14-24, and secondary search was adults aged 25 and over.

Written in English.

Academic literature, reports, and/or news media can be included.

Published between 2010 and 2025.

---

#### Exclusion Criteria

---

Student-athletes are not experiencing an injury.

No focus on social media use during injury recovery.

Population of children.

---

*Note.* This table summarizes the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to guide the literature search on student-athletes' social-media use during injury recovery.

## **2.2 Information Sources**

To search for literature, various electronic platforms and databases were searched, including ERIC, PsycINFO, JSTor, ProQuest, and SpringerLink, accessed through the

Ontario Tech University library. Google Scholar was also utilized to locate academic research. Google was also used to find media reports, such as news or magazine articles.

### **2.3 Search Terms**

The key search terms for the primary search, which focused on adolescent student-athletes aged 14–24, included a combination of targeted keywords. Boolean operators were applied to refine the search strategy; ‘AND’ was used to narrow the results by combining terms, while ‘OR’ was used to capture studies that included one or both specified terms (Calderon Martinez et al., 2023). Key terms include *student-athlete, injury, social media, adolescent mental health, high school, post-secondary, athletes in school, sports injury, sports, and digital wellness*.

To broaden the scope of the search to encompass adults aged 25 and older, these search terms were applied: *adult-athletes, athletes, elite-athletes with injuries or injury,* and related social media terms.

### **2.4 Selection Process**

After applying filters, refining results based on inclusion criteria, and reviewing abstracts for alignment with the research questions, 27 sources were selected for in-depth analysis. This sample included 17 sources focused on adolescent student-athletes aged 14–24, 7 sources on adult athletes aged 25 and older, and three sources representing both athletic populations.

Although the number of sources is limited, this gap in the literature demonstrates the lack of research in this area. Nonetheless, the 27 selected studies offer valuable

preliminary insights into the potential benefits, associated risks, and possible interventions.

## **2.5 Data Analysis**

Sources of interest were downloaded, entered into a spreadsheet, and organized alphabetically. Each data source was reviewed to explore information that helped answer the research questions. Information was extracted from each article, including title, author, publication year, literature source (e.g., journal or magazine name), purpose/aim, theoretical or empirical focus, participants' demographics, data collection and analysis, insights or findings, and conclusions, and was entered into the spreadsheet. Information about benefits and risks was coded differently. This information was reviewed several times to identify overlaps and create key themes. The key themes were entered into a table, and each article that mentioned a theme was identified (Table 2), allowing assessment of how frequently the themes appeared across data sources.

The next step involved synthesizing the findings to identify overarching themes related to the mental health benefits and risks of social media use. The paper was structured accordingly to reflect these themes. This systematic approach ensures that the review not only offers critical insights into the relationship between social media and adolescent student-athlete mental health during injury recovery but also emphasizes potential digital wellness strategies. Ultimately, this process supports the study's purpose of uncovering how social media influences mental health among injured adolescent student-athletes and exploring methods to promote digital wellness.

## **Chapter 3: Findings**

This study aimed to understand the mental health benefits and risks that social media poses for adolescent student-athletes during injury recovery. As Balcombe and De Leo (2020) noted, research on social media and sports medicine, particularly regarding injury, remains limited. The analysis from 27 sources uncovered three benefits and three risks.

### **3.1 Benefits and Risks of Social Media Use**

Following a review of the selected literature, several key mental health benefits and risks emerged that enhance our understanding of the psychological experiences of using social media during injury recovery for adolescent student-athletes. Social media offers benefits for athletes, including social support and connection, support during transitions, and access to health information. However, risks were also identified, including encountering negative commentary, increased loss of athletic identity, and social comparisons. These themes are described and provide context for the digital wellness recommendations discussed.

**Table 2***Themes Related to the Benefits and Risks of Social Media Use Among Injured Athletes*

Theme	Sources
<b>Benefits</b>	
Social support and connection (n = 10)	Balcombe & De Leo (2020); Brougham (2021); Claytor (2019); David et al. (2018); Fey (2024); Harris (2024); Haraldsdottir & Watson (2021); Nankervis et al. (2018); Sports Management Hub (n.d.); Sullivan et al. (2022); Wolverine Performance Psychology and Wellness Services (2025)
Transition support (n = 5)	Brougham (2021); Harry & Hammitt (2024); Harry & Weight (2021); Park et al. (2013); Stokowski et al. (2019)
Accessing health information (n = 8)	Ahmed et al. (2010, 2016); Balcombe & De Leo (2020); Carter et al. (2021); Kollia et al. (2018); Provvidenza et al. (2013); Sullivan et al. (2022); Williams et al. (2014)
<b>Risks</b>	
Encounter negative commentary (n = 6)	Browning & Sanderson (2012); Claytor (2019); David et al. (2018); Ogundipe et al. (2025); Udelf (2023); Yehya (2024)
Increased loss of athletic identity (n = 4)	Balcombe & De Leo (2020); Putukian (2016); Ruffing (2019); Sullivan et al. (2022)
Social comparison (n = 3)	Haraldsdottir & Watson (2021); Sullivan et al. (2022); Udelf (2023)

*Note.* This table summarizes key themes from the reviewed literature, highlighting both benefits and risks of social media use among student-athletes during injury recovery.

### **3.1.1 Benefits of Social Media Use**

#### ***Social Support and Connection***

The most frequently reported benefit in the research was that social media can serve as a powerful tool for support, connection, and emotional validation during injury recovery (Claytor, 2019; David et al., 2018; Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2022). Studies indicate that athletes who receive emotional and informational support from coaches, teammates, and healthcare professionals report lower levels of distress and greater success in adapting to their new reality (Claytor, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2022). Sport teams that encourage open communication and empathy from coaches and healthcare professionals foster greater resilience and adherence to rehabilitation (Sullivan et al., 2022). Sullivan et al. (2022) found that the quality of social support, specifically how relevant, consistent, and emotionally supportive it is, plays a critical role in reducing psychological distress and promoting better adjustment during injury recovery. When coaches proactively check in on injured players' emotional well-being and encourage open conversations about mental health, they help foster a psychologically safe environment, ultimately promoting resilience and improving the athlete's long-term recovery trajectory (Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021).

Digital platforms and social media enhance social support during injury recovery by enabling athletes to maintain connections and receive encouragement (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020). David et al. (2018) reports that Twitter allows athletes to stay connected with teammates and fans, offering moral support. A study by Barry et al. (2024) found

that social media engagement can foster a sense of connection and support among student-athletes, thereby contributing positively to their overall well-being.

Online peer communities, such as social media platforms, can help adolescent student-athletes feel more supported through connection and validation, reducing feelings of isolation and encouraging mental health conversations, particularly when focused on shared experiences (Sullivan et al., 2022). Watching others navigate the same injury and witnessing their setbacks, progress, and coping strategies can foster a sense of hope and normalization, reassuring injured athletes that their emotions and challenges are common and manageable (Claytor, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2022).

Athletes have shared their experiences of gaining support from social media. A study by Nankervis et al. (2018) provided significant insight into how professional athletes (Professional Australian Football League (AFL) players who were injured during the 2015 season) used social media, such as Twitter and Instagram, to seek support from followers. In a blog post, 'Taking Back Control', Nyima Fey (2024) reflects on the emotional challenges of recovering from a sports injury, describing how it can leave athletes feeling isolated and helpless. Fey (2024) emphasizes the importance of maintaining a strong social circle, seeking support, and offers practical suggestions for how others can show up for injured athletes in meaningful ways. In a video interview, collegiate volleyball player Kimberly Deboer talks about the mental challenges she faced after sustaining a serious injury (Harris, 2024). She highlights the importance of a support system and meaningful connections, noting that these relationships played a crucial role in her recovery from injury (Harris, 2024). Avery Peters, a senior on the University of Michigan Women's Soccer Team, shared her journey of recovering from a second ACL

tear sustained during her freshman year, and emphasized the importance of having a strong support system (Wolverine Performance Psychology and Wellness Services, 2025).

In contrast to receiving support, injured student-athletes may offer support by sharing details of their rehabilitation process, including treatments, timelines for their return to the game, and even what motivates them or where they find strength. This can empower both the audience and the student athlete, allowing them to feel a sense of purpose, influence, and hope (Sports Management Hub, n.d.). For example, Canadian race car driver Robert Wickens sustained a spinal cord injury in 2018 and used social media to show what rehabilitation looked like for his specific type of spinal cord injury. According to Wickens, he was hoping to document his journey back from injury and help another person somewhere down the road (Sports Management Hub, n.d.). Skier Lindsey Vonn used her social media reach (1.5 million Instagram followers and 1 million Twitter followers) to share her injury recovery from a body “broken beyond repair” due to the many injuries she sustained during crashes. She often posted inspirational comments and encouraged children and adolescents to “Never give up!” (Sports Management Hub, n.d.). Her Instagram posts show followers how much work and effort it takes to persevere and empower others.

The visibility of these experiences on social media highlights how it can be a powerful tool for emotional support among athletes. More recent research indicates that current and former athletes generally view social media platforms as positive communities that foster relationships and provide emotional support (Brougham, 2021).

The findings suggest that these online spaces play a direct role in shaping mental health outcomes during injury recovery and offer a space to connect with other athletes.

### ***Transition Support***

A specific area of support mentioned in the literature was for transitioning out of sports, especially after an injury, and into a career. Stokowski et al. (2019) point out that while roughly 2% of adolescent student-athletes will move into athlete careers, the other 98% will transition into careers, identities, and social roles outside elite competition, sometimes due to injuries sustained, limiting career choices. With this transition comes a host of emotions such as fear, anxiety, sadness, and loss (Harry & Weight, 2021). These feelings can be intensified, especially if they have a strong athletic identity. Harry and Weight (2021) found that supportive and communicative coaches play a vital role in easing athletes' emotional adjustment, helping them navigate identity changes, and foster healthier post-sport transitions. In addition, when athletes have higher levels of athletic identity, they are more likely to struggle during their transition out of sport, experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Stokowski et al., 2019). Most resources in post-secondary athletics is not related to out-of-sport transitions (Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Navarro, 2015), and athletes often lack resources and support from others experiencing similar transition tribulations (Miller & Buttell, 2018; Rohrs-Cordes & PauleKoba, 2018), especially when recovering from an injury.

However, athletes have found support for their transitions through social media (Brougham, 2021; Park et al., 2013). Harry and Hammitt (2024) found that TikTok was a key platform for former college athletes to share their transition experience and gain

support. They predominantly used the social media platform to discuss their transition environments, primarily providing internal, emotional, and informational support, and expressing a lack of institutional support. Additionally, TikTok served as an outlet for former athletes to share struggles with negative self-attitudes, resulting in poor states of physical and mental health (Harris & Hammitt, 2024).

A review of the literature reveals a notable gap in transition programming specifically designed for athletes navigating sport-related injuries. Social media may serve as a valuable tool during this period, offering injured athletes' opportunities to share personal experiences, access peer support, and learn effective coping strategies as they move out of sport and toward new career pathways. Overall, the evidence suggests that social media can meaningfully support injured adolescent athletes during this challenging transition.

### ***Accessing Health Information***

Social media platforms are an accessible way for adolescent student-athletes to gather health care-related information, especially related to injuries or recovery (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020). For example, social media has been a vehicle for disseminating concussion education across North America (Ahmed et al., 2010, 2016; Carter et al., 2021; Kollia et al., 2018; Provvidenza et al., 2013; Sullivan et al., 2022). Social media platforms have been used to share and seek concussion information, including Facebook (Ahmed et al., 2010), Pinterest, Instagram, and Flickr (Ahmed et al., 2016), X (formerly Twitter) (Sullivan et al., 2022), TikTok (Carter et al., 2021), and YouTube (Kollia et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2014). Researchers agree that athletes and

coaches must have access to proper information about concussions, and social media can be an excellent tool for disseminating this information (Carter et al., 2021; Kollia et al., 2018).

Social media has the potential to reach broad audiences, especially adolescents who seek health care information online more than adults (Kollia et al., 2018) and value short bits of information, such as TikTok videos, which provide this content (Schwedel, 2018). TikTok is currently one of the fastest-growing social media platforms worldwide and is primarily used by adolescents aged 16–24-year-olds (Vorhaus, 2020). However, authors caution that there is potential for misinformation or inadequate information to be shared on social media amongst adolescents (Kollia et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2014). For example, Kollia et al. (2018) found that few YouTube videos discussed concussion symptoms and methods of prevention. Williams et al. (2014) found that few videos were categorized as “educational” or recognized by an academic source. However, the research reveals that social media can be a great source to share and access information.

### **3.1.2 Risks of Social Media Use**

#### ***Encountering Negative Commentary***

A review of the literature highlighted that using social media during injury recovery can lead to negative commentary. This can increase stress and lead to negative emotions. Yehya (2024) discusses how social media can amplify psychological stress for athletes recovering from injury, particularly those with high visibility. They may be exposed to negative comments from their fans or the public about their performance and lack of involvement, which can cause stress and distract from recovery (David et al.,

2018). Ogundipe et al. (2025) also discussed the role of social media in the cyberbullying of athletes, especially when they are not performing well or returning from injury. This can lead to a perceived lack of social support and contribute to increased negative feelings such as loneliness and negative self-perception (Claytor, 2019). Athletes who feel undervalued or pressured to return to play too soon often experience prolonged psychological distress, which can negatively impact both their recovery and long-term well-being (Putukian, 2016).

In addition to the immediate emotional effects, negative commentary on social media can also influence how injured athletes interpret their role and value within their sports community. When criticism or cyberbullying becomes frequent, athletes may begin to internalize these messages, reinforcing the feelings of inadequacy and exclusion that naturally arise during time away from sport (Claytor, 2019). This is especially challenging when negative feedback or public scrutiny increases their sense of pressure or highlights their absence from competition (Ogundipe et al., 2025; Yehya, 2024). Over time, this environment can undermine motivation, confidence, and psychological readiness to return to play, factors that Putukian (2016) identifies as crucial for a healthy and successful sports injury recovery.

### ***Increased Loss of Athletic Identity***

The rise of social media has further complicated the relationship between athletic identity and injury among adolescent student-athletes (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2022). When an athlete's sense of self is strongly tied to sport participation, being removed from their sport due to injury can significantly disrupt that

identity. This disruption often leaves athletes feeling confused, displaced, and unsure of who they are without their athletic role. These feelings can intensify when they witness their teammates continuing to train and compete (Putukian, 2016), experiences now amplified by constant exposure through social media.

Claytor (2019) notes that sports injuries can deepen identity loss, particularly for athletes who already struggle to maintain a sense of belonging within their team. For example, an injured athlete might turn to social media to stay connected by watching team practices, highlights, or competitions, yet end up feeling even more distanced because they cannot participate themselves. Social media, rather than bridging the gap, can heighten awareness of what they are missing. This sense of disconnection often extends beyond competition. Injured athletes may be absent from team meetings, practices, game-day routines, and informal team conversations (Claytor, 2019). When this separation occurs abruptly, it can create a dramatic emotional shift, from being highly involved and valued within the team environment to feeling entirely removed from it.

Social support from teammates and coaches plays a critical role in buffering the psychological impact of injury (Claytor, 2019). However, when this support is limited, whether in person or through social media, athletes may perceive a lack of care or attention. This perceived withdrawal can worsen feelings of isolation and negative self-perception, especially if athletes feel forgotten or overlooked during their injury rehabilitation period, further increasing the loss of their athletic identity (Claytor, 2019).

## *Social Comparison*

The pressure to present an idealized version of oneself online and even to keep up appearances during an injury can also reinforce feelings of inadequacy and comparison (Sullivan et al., 2022). Haraldsdottir and Watson (2021) similarly found that young female athletes often experience heightened anxiety and body image concerns when exposed to idealized portrayals of recovery and performance on social media, deepening feelings of inadequacy during injury. Sports Psychologists, Udelf (2023) states that constantly comparing yourself to others, something social media can contribute to, fuels a stressful loss of confidence, frustration, and misery. It can also foster resentment towards other people, leading to contentious relationships and divided, broken teams (Udelf, 2023). Maggie, a former NCAA Division I field hockey player at Brown University, shares in a personal blog how daily comparison and internal pressure took a toll on her mental health throughout her four years as a college student-athlete (Ruffing, 2019). Despite struggling the entire time, it took her 23 years to reach out to a mental health professional, which is something she attributes to the persistent stigma surrounding mental health in sport (Ruffing, 2019). Her story showcases the emotional burden many athletes carry in silence, the lack of investment in the psychological well-being of student-athletes, and how social media comparison can intensify these feelings and mental health struggles.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

### **4.1 Interpretation of Findings**

The intersection of social media use, injury recovery, and mental health in student-athletes presents a complex and evolving challenge. This literature review highlights the double-edged nature of social media: while it offers avenues for support, connection, and education, it also presents risks, such as negative commentary, loss of athletic identity, and social comparison. Injured student-athletes often experience heightened psychological vulnerability due to the disruption of their athletic identity, the stigma surrounding mental health in sports culture, and the isolating nature of the recovery process (Putukian, 2016).

Based on a preliminary review of the literature on social media use during injury recovery and the identification of mental health benefits and risks, several strategies to promote healthy social media use were identified to address research question two. These include: 1) develop healthy online social support networks, 2) implement programs to support student-athletes transitioning away from sport, 3) mindfulness for coping and social media engagement, and 4) use social media as a platform to combat mental health stigma. Together, these strategies can help adolescent student-athletes maintain healthy social media use during injury recovery.

## **4.2 The Need for Digital Wellness**

### ***Develop Healthy Online Social Support Networks***

Given how social media can support injury recovery, athletes should view it as a digital wellness strategy. Athletes can learn to develop healthy online social support groups and engage in positive ways that enhance their well-being. Ogundipe et al. (2025) suggest that athletes deliberately build their networks to include people who promote positivity and encourage them. They also recommend that athletes follow accounts that support motivation, education, and positivity to curate uplifting content. Furthermore, Ogundipe et al. (2025) state that fostering an encouraging atmosphere is a collective responsibility; therefore, social media companies and sports leagues should also take the lead by offering more resources and mental health support to players and coaches.

Sullivan et al. (2022) stated that consistent, focused emotional support plays a critical role in reducing psychological distress and promoting better adjustment during injury recovery for athletes. Therefore, coaches and team members should proactively check in on injured players' emotional well-being and support their long-term recovery trajectory (Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021). Social media can be a way for the coaches and team members to send positive messages and notes of encouragement, helping cultivate that support system.

### ***Implement Programs to Support Student-Athletes Transitioning Away From Sport***

Petitpas and France (2012) highlighted how athletes are at risk for identity foreclosure due to the demands of sport participation, which hinder their ability and/or

desire to explore alternative identities and interests. This can cause problems when an injury necessitates transitioning away from sport into a new identity. Therefore, athletics departments in post-secondary education can develop policies and programs that support athletes transitioning out of school and sports due to injury, especially career-changing injuries (Park et al., 2013). David et al. (2018) suggest that coaches and athletes receive social media training and develop best practices to support student athletes. Social media can provide resources, community support groups, and access to mental health care. This information should focus on the unique wellness challenges these athletes face, including the loss of athletic identity, stress, and disconnection (Nesi, 2020; Petipas & France, 2012). For example, a loss of athletic identity can occur when an adolescent student-athlete transitions away from a dream career in sports. Helping them find ways to build a new identity or feel a sense of efficacy and self-esteem is essential. This would address some of the criticisms from scholars who argue that many athletes leave college without having developed autonomy, internal locus of control, or a sense of responsibility necessary for healthy transitions (Harry & Weight, 2021; Hatteberg, 2018). Hatteberg (2018) recommends that athletic departments establish an Athlete Transition Director (ATD) to ensure that graduating athletes' transition healthfully into their post-graduation lives.

### ***Mindfulness for Coping and Social Media Engagement***

As the literature highlights, playing competitive sports and experiencing an injury can be stressful for adolescent student-athletes (David et al., 2018; Putukian, 2016; Yehya, 2024). Mindfulness can be a way to cope with that stress and recovery journey, as well as an approach to healthy social media use. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as

"the awareness that arises by paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (Brenner, 2024, p.300). Research demonstrates that mindfulness-based practices are particularly effective for adolescents, who may struggle with emotion regulation and impulsivity, especially when confronted with unexpected disruptions to identity and routine, such as a sports injury (Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021). Mindfulness is also being integrated into sports medicine programs to support both performance enhancement and injury rehabilitation (Brenner, 2024).

For injured student-athletes, mindfulness practices such as breathwork, journaling, and guided imagery offer practical ways to regulate emotions, process frustration, and cope with uncertainty during the recovery process (Liu & Noh, 2024; Mohammed et al., 2018). Liu and Noh (2024) found that mindfulness interventions can significantly improve psychological adaptation following sports injury and identified five key aspects to consider when implementing these interventions: dosage, timing, methods, implementers, and intervention types. With advancements in technology, apps, wearable devices, and programs can offer mindfulness training and opportunities (Huberty et al., 2019). Apps such as Headspace and Calm can help with breathing, guided imagery, and grounding techniques (Huberty et al., 2019).

Case studies highlighted by Brenner (2024) demonstrate that student-athletes who consistently applied mindfulness strategies during injury rehabilitation experienced greater motivation, improved coping, and enhanced emotional flexibility, all of which contributed to more successful recoveries. Arvinen-Barrow et al. (2015) also found that athletes who drew on a range of mental skills during injury rehabilitation, including goal setting, positive self-talk, and imagery, were better able to manage stress and enhance

psychological resilience. Mindfulness-based programs have also been linked to reduced pain catastrophes, improved psychological flexibility, and lower levels of anxiety and depression among adolescent athletes (Brenner, 2024; Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021). These findings align with broader research suggesting that emotional self-regulation and psychological resilience are critical protective factors during injury rehabilitation, particularly for adolescents who are simultaneously navigating developmental identity formation (Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021; McLeod, 2023).

Research suggests that team culture plays a significant role in the successful integration of mindfulness into injury recovery (Brenner, 2024). When coaches and healthcare professionals model mindfulness and emphasize its value for both performance and well-being, athletes are more likely to engage with the practice (Brenner, 2024; Cassilo & Sanderson, 2024). This reinforces the importance of normalizing mental health strategies in sports culture, ensuring mindfulness is framed not as a weakness, but as a strength-building tool for both mental and physical resilience (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020; Cassilo & Sanderson, 2024).

Athletes should also consider mindful social media use. This can be defined as being in the moment, aware, and reflective of how we interact with social media (Laffier et al., 2025). For example, Dr. Marcy Faustin, a sports medicine physician at UC Davis and with the U.S. Gymnastics Team, emphasized that athletes should be mindful of their social media use, especially before competition, as exposure to negative commentary can increase anxiety and disrupt focus (Yehya, 2024). She recommended avoiding social media in the hour before events. She encouraged athletes to rely on their support systems, coaches, teammates, and family members to help navigate online criticism (Yehya,

2024). Ogundipe et al. (2025) states that athletes can set boundaries to reduce these effects by focusing on reliable support networks, limiting their use of social media, and prioritizing offline activities. These same recommendations can be applied to injured student-athletes. During their recovery period, they should examine which social media sites provide support and less criticism, and the effects on their mental health.

### ***Social Media as a Platform to Combat Mental Health Stigma***

The literature revealed that stigma, the perception that seeking help for mental health challenges reflects weakness or personal failure, is particularly prevalent in athletic cultures (Gulliver et al., 2012), where mental toughness usually is what is encouraged from parents and coaches (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2024). Stigma surrounding mental health continues to be a significant barrier for injured athletes seeking psychological support (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2024; Putukian, 2016). Many athletes are conditioned to believe that seeking help for mental health struggles is a sign of weakness, making them reluctant to disclose their emotional or physical distress (Putukian, 2016). This stigma is reinforced by the broader sporting culture, where mental toughness and resilience are often prioritized over emotional vulnerability, and further perpetuated by the messages athletes receive from coaches and parents that discourage seeking psychological support (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2024; Putukian, 2016).

Adolescents often curate their social media presence by highlighting only the positive aspects of their lives, which can discourage open conversations about mental health challenges (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020). This selective representation can create unrealistic expectations (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020), which may make injured athletes

feel isolated in their struggles and reinforce the belief that they should suppress their emotions. Putukian (2016) discusses a study of athletes aged 16 to 23, which found that stigma was the most significant perceived barrier to seeking help for mental health concerns. As a result, accessing mental health services remains an important challenge for many athletes.

To combat stigma in sports, there is a need for a cultural shift in how mental health is discussed within teams, at home, and on social media platforms (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2024; Sullivan et al., 2022). Encouraging athletes to use their platforms to openly discuss mental health, promoting supportive online communities, and integrating mental health resources into athletic organizations can help normalize psychological support for adolescent student-athletes (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020; Putukian, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2022). By using social media to promote positive mental health messaging and education, the stigma surrounding mental health in sports can be gradually dismantled, empowering athletes to prioritize their well-being without fear of judgment (Balcombe & De Leo, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2022).

### **4.3 Conclusions**

This literature review highlighted both the potential mental health benefits and risks of social media use during injury recovery for athletes, including adolescent student-athletes and adults. The benefits included access to social support and connection, transition support, and accessing health information. In contrast, the risks included encountering negative commentary, increased loss of athletic identity, and social comparison. Social media can foster hope, motivation, and resilience by allowing injured

athletes to stay connected, share their journeys, and learn from others facing similar challenges. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of an integrated approach that builds psychological resilience alongside practical digital wellness strategies, ensuring injured student-athletes are equipped to manage both their recovery and their online environments in healthy and mindful ways.

Digital wellness strategies such as developing healthy online social support networks, implementing programs to support student-athletes transitioning away from sport, mindfulness for coping, social media engagement, and using social media as a platform to combat mental health stigma are promising interventions to enhance psychological resilience and facilitate adaptive coping mechanisms for student-athletes during injury recovery. These strategies promote emotional regulation, coping skills, and increased support, helping to mitigate some of the adverse effects of both injury and social media exposure.

#### **4.4 Future Research**

While this literature review provides a foundation for understanding the relationship between social media use and injury recovery in student-athletes, several gaps remain. Future studies should examine the long-term impact of digital wellness interventions, particularly in tracking athletes across different stages of recovery. Research comparing different digital wellness strategies would help identify the most effective interventions based on moderating variables such as injury severity, sport type, and mental health status.

Further investigation is also needed into how social media algorithms may influence the recovery mindset of injured athletes, given evidence that algorithmically curated content can reinforce emotional states and impact mental health among adolescents (Wang et al., 2025). Research should address other factors, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and access to digital resources, and how these factors impact engagement with digital wellness strategies. Examining these elements will help develop more inclusive and effective interventions, ensuring that digital wellness strategies support a broader range of student-athletes in their recovery journey. By addressing these gaps, future research can help develop evidence-based digital wellness programs that improve mental health and resilience among injured adolescent student-athletes in the digital age.

## **Chapter 5: Knowledge Mobilization**

### **5.1 Overview of Knowledge Mobilization Activities**

The effort to disseminate research more broadly with non-academic audiences is known as knowledge mobilization (KMb) (Cooper et al., 2018). KMb is a critical component of research, as it ensures that the knowledge generated extends beyond academic settings and reaches the individuals, organizations, and communities who can benefit most from it. By translating research into accessible, practical formats, knowledge mobilization bridges the gap between theory and practice, increases the social relevance of scholarly work, and fosters meaningful change in the community (Levin, 2013). In the context of this project, knowledge mobilization empowers parents, educators, athletes,

and coaches with evidence-based strategies that can be applied in real-world settings to support the well-being of adolescent student-athletes in the digital age.

The literature suggests three types of KMb strategies: research-based products, events, and networks (Cooper et al., 2009). The focus of this project was on all three strategies. First, develop research-based products such as webinar presentations. Second, build community networks across education, coaching, and fitness. And third, create community events such as workshops to explore the topic and develop digital wellness strategies. The KMb strategies undertaken as part of this project included a community workshop, blog posts, and a pre-recorded webinar, all shared across multiple social media platforms. Tracking measures were used to assess the reach and potential impact of the KMb strategies.

## **5.2 Knowledge Mobilization Artifact 1 – Community Workshop**

The first knowledge mobilization artifact was a community workshop hosted at CrossFit Barrie on July 2nd, 2025, with 11 participants. This one-hour workshop was created for parents and coaches of adolescent athletes to learn how to support their athletes if they were to experience an injury. Many members of CrossFit Barrie are parents of young athletes who compete in high-level sports. Some parents coach youth sports teams. Upon learning about my research study, several members asked if the findings could be shared with them. This led me to design my first workshop for this audience.

### **5.2.1 Workshop Overview and Purpose**

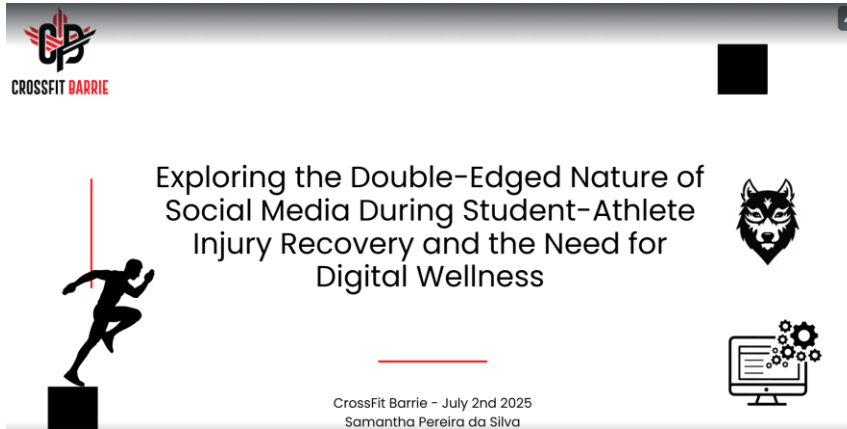
The purpose of this workshop was to provide parents and coaches of adolescent student-athletes with practical strategies and digital wellness tools to help them navigate the challenges of the digital age. The workshop was designed and organized around four core themes from the literature review findings: athletic identity, stigma, social support, and mindfulness. These themes were identified as critical factors influencing adolescent student-athletes' mental health and digital engagement during injury recovery.

The workshop provided an overview of the themes and practical strategies for parents and coaches to support adolescents as they navigate an injury in the digital age. Digital wellness strategies, including the creation of supportive online spaces, mindful social media use, and digital journaling, were discussed. Real-world athlete narratives and case studies, reflective questions, and parent- and coach-specific strategies were embedded to bridge research and practice. This design ensured that the workshop not only conveyed theoretical insights but also provided participants with actionable tools to foster resilience, emotional regulation, and healthy digital habits within their family and community contexts. Moderating factors were also reviewed, as no two adolescent student-athletes are the same, and digital wellness strategies may have different impacts on each of them.

The session featured an interactive presentation with slides, along with an accompanying online blog post for continued access to the content. Both resources highlighted strategies for fostering resilience and healthy digital habits among adolescents.

## Figure 1

*Exploring The Double-Edged Nature of Social Media Workshop July 2, 2025*



*Note:* Screenshot of workshop presentation title slide.

## Figure 2

*Strategies Discussed in the Community Workshop*

### Practical Strategies for Parents & Coaches

**Foster Supportive Online & Offline Spaces**

- Create team or family chat spaces that encourage sharing struggles as well as wins (not just highlight reels).
- Normalize recovery stories by sharing examples of other athletes who navigated setbacks.
- Encourage online communities or mentorship connections with older athletes who model healthy coping.

**Model Digital Wellness**

- Your own digital habits influence the athlete's. For example, parents constantly checking stats or comments can unintentionally increase pressure.
- Coaches can model mindful tech use by setting intentional communication boundaries (e.g., no late-night performance critiques via team chat).

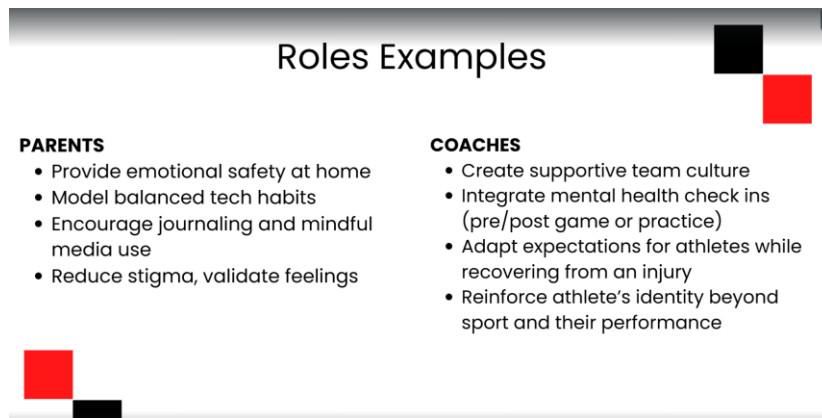
**Encourage Reflective Practices**

- Parents can introduce simple digital journaling prompts and praise reflection, not just outcomes.
- Coaches can integrate mindfulness or check-in rituals at the start of team meetings or practices.

*Note:* Screenshot of workshop presentation strategies slide.

**Figure 3**

*Roles Examples Discussed in the Community Workshop*



*Note.* Screenshot of workshop presentation roles examples slide.

**[Link to Workshop Slides](#)**

**5.2.2 Reflection and Impact**

A total of 11 participants attended the workshop in person. They were parents or coaches of young athletes and were curious about the research findings. The workshop was advertised through a membership email, and interested members could sign up via our members management system called Push Press. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many parents verbally sharing that they could personally relate to the concepts discussed, particularly regarding their own children's experiences with injury recovery and social media use. The workshop served as an essential opportunity to bridge academic research with community practice. By delivering this workshop in a community-based setting, the knowledge mobilization efforts extended beyond academic audiences to directly support local families, aligning with the project's overall purpose.

### **5.3 Knowledge Mobilization Artifact 2 – Blog Post**

The second KMb strategy involved creating a blog post after the community workshop. The purpose of this blog post was to extend the reach of the presentation and provide participants with a concise, accessible summary of the key concepts discussed. By translating the workshop content into a written digital format, attendees and other community members could revisit the main ideas and takeaways at their own pace. The post was shared through both CrossFit Barrie’s website and social media platforms, allowing the research findings to reach a broader audience beyond those who attended the live session. This approach supported sustained engagement, reflection, and knowledge retention while reinforcing the importance of ongoing dialogue around adolescent mental health and digital wellness.

## Figure 4

### *Blog Post Announcement*



July 4, 2025

### **Exploring the Double-Edged Nature of Social Media During Student-Athlete Injury Recovery and the Need for Digital Wellness**

A COMMUNITY BASED PROJECT

[READ MORE →](#)

*Note.* Screenshot of blog post cover page.

### **Link to Blog Post**

#### 5.3.1 Reflection and Impact

The blog post reached a broad, diverse audience, including parents, coaches, educators, and youth members of the local fitness and adolescent sports community. It was distributed through the CrossFit Barrie email network to over 1,200 subscribers and posted on social media platforms to encourage further engagement and accessibility. Many shared that the discussion on digital wellness and social media use resonated with their own experiences supporting adolescent student-athletes recovering from injury.

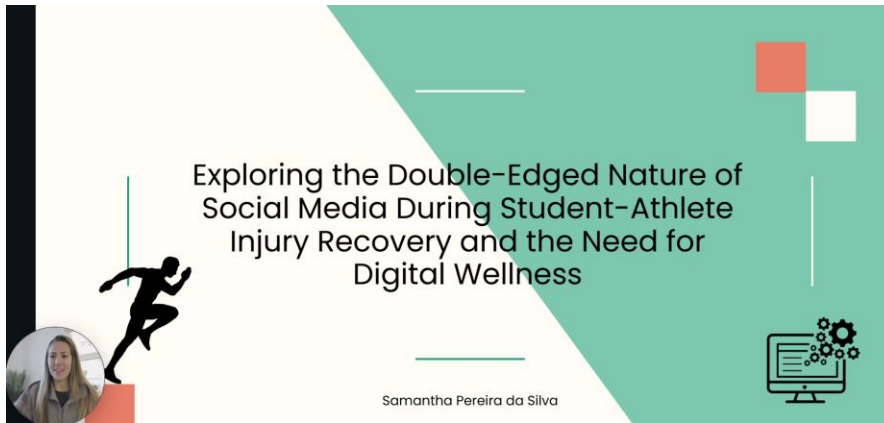
The most meaningful outcome was seeing how the research translated into practical conversations within the community. For example, after the blog post, a few parents reached out with follow-up questions about how to help their teenagers set healthier technology boundaries during recovery or how to recognize early signs of emotional distress. The responses reflected curiosity, empathy, and a desire to learn more about fostering mental health in athletic environments. This engagement inspired the development of a pre-recorded community webinar as a third KMb strategy, designed to further expand access to the research findings and support continued learning beyond the written format.

#### **5.4 Knowledge Mobilization Artifact 3 – Community Webinar**

For the third KMb strategy, a pre-recorded 45-minute community webinar on Canva was conducted, designed to translate key findings and strategies into accessible, actionable knowledge for educators, parents, coaches, athletes, and community members. The webinar aimed to foster meaningful dialogue around adolescent student-athlete mental health in the digital age and to bridge the gap between academic research and practical community application. The session was shared on World Mental Health Day, Friday, October 10th, 2025, aligning with the global movement to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and promote mental well-being (Figure 5).

## Figure 5

### *World Mental Health Day Webinar*



*Note.* Screenshot of webinar title page.

By leveraging digital platforms, the webinar served as a tool for broad community engagement and knowledge, extending its impact beyond the immediate audience. The webinar was intended for parents, coaches, and athletes to watch and learn about the research findings. The 45-minute webinar recording and related resources were circulated through multiple channels to ensure continued access and knowledge sharing.

#### **5.4.1 World Mental Health Day**

The webinar was part of a series of events for World Mental Health Day, Friday, October 10th, 2025, hosted by The MHDA Research Lab at Ontario Tech University, the Frazer Faculty of Education.

## Figure 6

*MHDA Lab Announcement for Webinar*

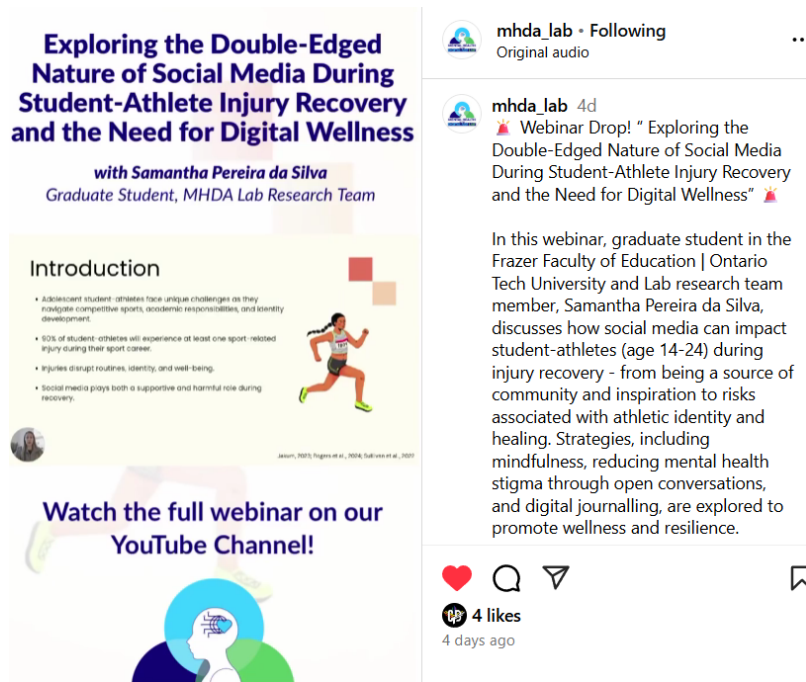


*Note.* Screenshot of YouTube title page.

To maximize reach and engagement, the webinar recording was shared across multiple platforms and community networks. It was shared on their **YouTube**, **Instagram**, and **LinkedIn** platforms.

**Figure 7**

*Instagram Post*



*Note.* Screenshot of the MHDA research lab Instagram post.

It was also posted on CrossFit Barrie’s social media channels, including Instagram, Facebook, website, and **blog** channel, to connect with local community members, athletes, and families. The link was also shared with some students at Georgian College and on the author’s personal **LinkedIn profile** to reach a broader professional and academic audience. Sharing the webinar on World Mental Health Day amplified its relevance and visibility, encouraging conversations and reflections around adolescent mental health and digital wellness within both educational and community settings.

## Figure 8

### *Blog Post New Video*



*Note.* Screenshot of blog post cover page.

## Figure 9

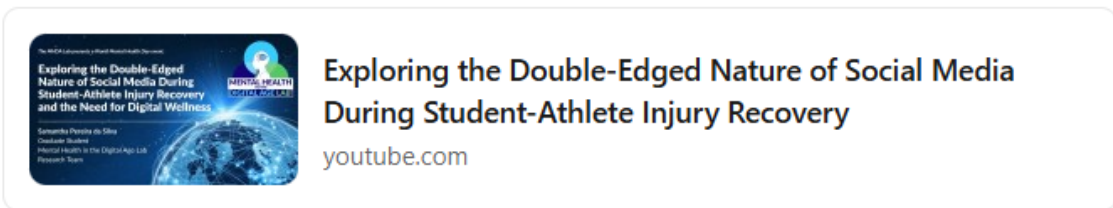
### *Mental Health Day Post*

Today is a reminder to check in with yourself and with others. ❤️

World Mental Health Day is more than a date on the calendar. It's a call to action to listen, support and connect.

Here I share some insights from my most recent research - Exploring the Double-Edged Nature of Social Media During Student-Athlete Injury Recovery

<https://lnkd.in/gZf-RZ8q> ✓



*Note.* Screenshot from the author's personal LinkedIn profile.

## Figure 10

World Mental Health Day Blog

# WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

October 10, 2025

In recognition of **World Mental Health Day**, we pre-recorded a special **Community Webinar** focused on supporting adolescent mental health and digital wellness for student athletes.

Led by CrossFit Barrie's Co-Owner Samantha Pereira da Silva, this session explored how social media impacts young people's well-being while recovering from an injury, and shared practical strategies for parents, coaches, and educators to foster healthier digital habits.

This important conversation brings together research and real-world experience to help our community better support youth inside and outside the gym.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvH-zz\\_euTs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvH-zz_euTs)



*Note.* Screenshot of mental health day blog.

### 5.4.2 Reflection and Impact

Creating and sharing the community webinar was a valuable opportunity to bridge the gap between academic research and practical, community-based applications. This artifact enabled the translation of the research findings into a format that was both accessible and engaging for educators, parents, coaches, and community members. By choosing to pre-record the session, clear and concise delivery of key messages was ensured, while also allowing greater flexibility in how and when the audience could access the content.

Launching the webinar on World Mental Health Day (Friday, October 10, 2025) added meaningful context to the initiative. Aligning with a global awareness day heightened the topic's relevance and fostered a sense of shared responsibility for supporting adolescent student-athlete mental health in digital spaces. It was encouraging to see how leveraging multiple platforms expanded the webinar's reach beyond traditional academic audiences. This multi-platform approach enabled diverse stakeholders to engage with the content in ways that felt relevant to their roles.

One of the most impactful aspects of this process was witnessing how digital platforms can extend the longevity and reach of knowledge mobilization efforts. The recorded webinar continues to circulate through various networks, allowing individuals to revisit and share the content over time. This sustained accessibility contributes to ongoing dialogue and reflection, supporting the broader goal of digital wellness education as a community-wide responsibility.

## **5.5 Next Steps**

Looking ahead, the author plans to extend the impact of this work through multiple avenues of knowledge mobilization and dissemination. The findings will be shared at an upcoming academic conference and through a community workshop for athletes in Barrie, Ontario, and the surrounding areas, aimed at fostering awareness and dialogue around digital wellness and mental health in sport. Efforts have already been made to connect with adolescent athletes through local high schools and post-secondary schools. In collaboration with research supervisor Dr. Jennifer Laffier and project team member Madison Westley, the author plans to prepare the paper for publication as a

journal article and/or book chapter to contribute to the broader academic dialogue on adolescent mental health, social media, and sport.

Another planned KMb strategy involves developing a toolkit. This initiative will be undertaken collaboratively with the project team at the MHDA lab following the expansion of this preliminary research into a broader systematic literature review. The process will be guided by Graham et al.'s (2006) Knowledge-to-Action (KTA) framework, which supports integrating research evidence into practice. The steps outlined in this framework, along with additional modifications specific to the project, include: 1) conducting a needs assessment or stakeholder engagement, 2) reviewing the literature, 3) extracting evidence-based strategies and interventions, 4) creating the toolkit, and 5) assessing and evaluating the toolkit (Graham et al., 2006).

Measures to assess the impact of these KMb activities are also being developed. The author is developing tools for each activity (e.g., workshops, webinars, conference papers) to assess how many people attended, viewed, downloaded, shared, or commented on these items. This highlights both the extent of its reach and its potential impact on the broader community.

Through these next steps, the project aims to continue translating the research into practice by bridging the gap between academic findings and real-world application. By continuing to expand this work, the author aspires to foster a culture of digital wellness and mental health awareness within athletic communities, empowering athletes, educators, and support networks to create healthier and more supportive environments in sport.

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