

*The Negative Impacts of Toxic Sensationalism in Sports Journalism and Media on Collegiate
Student-Athletes*

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Abstract

Participating in collegiate sports is a significant achievement that requires dedication, discipline, and immense physical and mental effort. Student-athletes balance rigorous academic schedules alongside intense training and competition, often under public scrutiny. While media coverage can bring recognition and opportunities, the role of sports journalism and media in the lives of college athletes is not always positive. In fact, the contemporary landscape of sports journalism exerts harmful effects on the well-being and development of these young athletes. These harmful effects that the student-athletes endure can cause burnout, depression, and even suicide.

Journalists are not the only problem, of course. The fans are a huge part of the continuous harassment and abuse towards the student-athletes. Social media opens a pathway for fans to send negative messages and comments on the student-athlete's profile. Gambling really fans the flames, and it is a huge deal to limit the amount of betting on collegiate sports.

Introduction

Media narratives often prioritize sensationalism and controversy, exploiting stories for clicks, ratings, or social media engagement. This environment fosters undue pressure on student-athletes to maintain a public image that aligns with media expectations, often at the expense of their mental health and personal growth. Furthermore, the rise of social media has enabled direct and sometimes hostile interactions between fans and athletes, worsening issues such as harassment, racial bias, and unrealistic performance expectations. This paper examines how sports journalism and media negatively impact collegiate student-athletes, focusing on social media harassment, biased reporting, racialized commentary, and institutional pressures. By integrating real-life examples, academic research, and organizational responses, this analysis highlights the urgent need for reforms in how media engages with college athletes.

Media Methods and Negative Portrayals

Sports journalism has long been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it celebrates athletic excellence and provides athletes with a platform to build personal brands. On the other hand, it often thrives on scandals and controversy, amplifying negative stories to attract public attention. One commonly used method is sensationalizing unverified allegations to stir public interest. For example, the University of Colorado's football program endured extensive national and international media scrutiny over alleged sexual assault incidents involving players, as discussed in the article *Defining Scandal in Sports: Media and Corporate Sponsor Perspectives* (Hughes & Shank, 2005). While holding athletes accountable is necessary, premature or biased reporting can irreparably damage young athletes' reputations, even before investigations conclude.

The creation of athletes' "hype" is another tactic employed by media outlets. Journalists and commentators often build unrealistic expectations for promising athletes early in their careers. When these athletes fail to meet such expectations, the media quickly shifts to criticism. This cycle contributes to heightened stress and anxiety among student-athletes, who may struggle to reconcile their public image with personal challenges and developmental growth. (Frisby & Wanda, 2018).

Race remains a highly sensitive and often problematic topic in sports media coverage. Commentators have occasionally made derogatory remarks or relied on stereotypes that question the abilities, character, or intelligence of athletes based on their racial background. The study *Talking Around Race: Stereotypes, Media, and the Twenty-First Century Collegiate Athlete* (J. L. & Pol'y 199, 2012) documents instances where racial bias in commentary not only affects public perception but also places unwarranted pressure on athletes to overcome prejudice in addition to their sporting responsibilities. The resulting spotlight can be emotionally draining, as athletes become unwilling symbols in broader societal debates on race.

Social Media Harassment: A Modern Epidemic

The advent of social media has revolutionized how fans interact with athletes, creating unprecedented opportunities for connection but also exposing student-athletes to rampant harassment. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow fans to communicate directly with athletes, often without filters or consequences. Twitter being a huge media outlet for coaches and players to interact with each other have developed players to maintain a certain appearance on their platforms. They are not given the chance to express themselves because it could hurt how they are perceived by coaches, journalists, and fans (Gorrell, 2025). According

to Figure 1, it shows the percentage of what student-athletes prefer as their social media app usage.

The NCAA's "Draw the Line" campaign provides stark statistics underscoring the severity of this problem. According to the campaign's data, over 72,000 posts targeting student athletes, coaches, and officials were flagged for abuse during championship events. Of these, more than 5,000 comments were classified as threatening or abusive, with a staggering 80% directed at athletes participating in the NCAA March Madness tournament. Female athletes bore the brunt of this harassment, receiving three times as many abusive messages as their male counterparts (NCAA, 2023).

Much of the abuse is linked to the expanding role of sports betting, which has introduced a new dimension of fan frustration. When bets fail due to perceived poor athlete performance, fans often lash out online, blaming young athletes for financial losses. This dynamic exposes student-athletes, many of whom are still teenagers or in their early twenties, to adult frustrations and bitter comments, which can severely impact their mental health and academic focus.

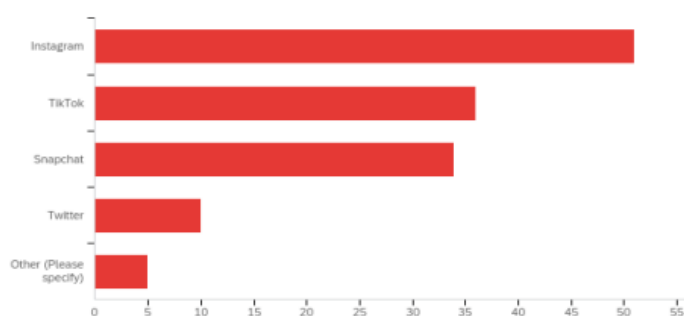


Figure 1

A bar chart presenting the amount of preferred usage of student-athletes

Key Themes: Negativity, Pressure, Prejudice, Harassment, and Youth

Five key themes emerge repeatedly when analyzing the media's impact on student-athletes:

- **Negativity:** Media narratives often focus disproportionately on mistakes, controversies, or failures rather than achievements, fostering a toxic environment.
- **Pressure:** The constant spotlight places immense pressure on athletes to maintain flawless public personas and peak athletic performance.
- **Prejudice:** Racial, gender, and socioeconomic biases infiltrate media coverage, skewing public perception and increasing mental burdens.
- **Harassment:** Online abuse, fueled by anonymity and gambling-related frustrations, targets student-athletes relentlessly.
- **Youth:** Most college athletes are still young adults, navigating critical developmental phases, making them particularly vulnerable to media-driven harm.

The recurring themes found in negative media coverage of collegiate student-athletes such as sensationalized criticism, unrealistic performance expectations, public shaming after losses, and invasive scrutiny of personal lives collectively contribute to a hostile media environment that can significantly impair athlete well-being. These narratives often prioritize entertainment value and audience engagement over accuracy and empathy, reducing athletes to mere storylines rather than recognizing them as complex individuals balancing academic, athletic, and personal responsibilities.

NCAA Responsibilities and Institutional Responses

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) plays a central role in overseeing college sports in the United States. Recognizing the growing challenges student-athletes face due to media scrutiny and social media harassment, the NCAA has initiated programs aimed at addressing these concerns. A prominent example is the “Draw the Line” campaign, launched to raise awareness about the consequences of online abuse and gambling-related harassment directed at athletes during high-profile events such as the NCAA basketball championships.

The campaign highlights the scale of abuse, reporting that their AI-based monitoring system flagged over 72,000 messages targeting student-athletes, coaches, and officials. More troubling, over 5,000 of these comments were abusive or threatening, with female athletes disproportionately affected, receiving triple the volume of abuse compared to male athletes. The NCAA explicitly calls on fans to “curb abuse directed at you and your teammates,” emphasizing that college athletics should be a space free from harassment, where athletes are “supported and celebrated for their academic and athletic achievements” rather than “targeted with threats and abuse” (NCAA, 2023).

Beyond awareness campaigns, the NCAA has committed to partnering with lawmakers to develop regulatory frameworks designed to protect student-athletes from online harassment and exploitation. Additionally, the association has increased investment in educational resources for over 500,000 athletes, including digital literacy programs focused on managing public personas and understanding the implications of their social media presence.

Real-Life Evidence: Case Studies of Media Impact

Angel Reese and the 2023 NCAA Women's Basketball Championship

Angel Reese, a standout player for Louisiana State University (LSU), became a lightning rod for media controversy during the 2023 NCAA Women's Basketball Championship. After her team's victory, Reese made a celebratory gesture that quickly became the focal point of the media. Rather than focusing on her athletic excellence, numerous news outlets and commentators framed the gesture as unsportsmanlike and provocative, fueling a divisive narrative.

The media amplification of this isolated moment led to widespread online harassment, much of it laced with racial and misogynistic undertones. Reese was subjected to personal attacks, threats, and demeaning commentary across Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, creating a hostile environment that extended beyond the basketball court. Analysts and scholars have noted that this incident exemplifies how sports media can disproportionately scrutinize Black female athletes, reinforce harmful stereotypes and impact mental well-being (Trigg, 2025).

Jabo Burrow and the Underreported Concussion Crisis

Former Vanderbilt football player Jabo Burrow's experiences underscore the media's complex role in shaping public understanding of athletes' health. After sustaining multiple concussions during his collegiate career, Burrow openly discussed the emotional and cognitive difficulties he faced, including memory loss, depression, and anxiety. Investigative reporting revealed that sports media often downplayed the severity of such injuries or romanticized rapid returns to play.

This underreporting contributed to a broader culture that minimizes the long-term health risks associated with concussions in college football. The media's failure to adequately inform the public and pressure institutions for better safety protocols ultimately left athletes like Burrow vulnerable to severe, chronic health consequences. His case has sparked calls for more responsible journalism that prioritizes athlete's health over sensationalism or game-day narratives.

Nick Saban's Critique of Media Influence

Nick Saban, head coach of the University of Alabama's football program and one of the most successful coaches in college sports history, has publicly criticized the media's influence on collegiate athletics. Referred metaphorically as "rat poison" by Saban, he describes how media narratives can foster validation among players by promoting an unrealistic sense of security after high-profile wins. Saban argues that excessive media praise can reduce athlete motivation and effort, contributing to declines in team performance.

His critique highlights a less discussed dimension of media impact: the psychological effect of external validation on athletes' work ethic and focus. While media attention can inspire and energize athletes, it can also create a false sense of achievement that undermines ongoing development (AL.com, 2017).

Psychological and Performance Impacts

Mental Health Consequences

Research consistently links intense media scrutiny with adverse mental health outcomes among collegiate athletes. Anxiety, depression, and burnout are increasingly reported in connection with the pressures imposed by media coverage and social media interactions. The phenomenon of the “curated athlete” — the pressure to maintain an idealized public persona — contributes significantly to emotional fatigue and identity dissonance (Jones et al., 2025).

For example, athletes managing NIL (Name, Image, Likeness) obligations must constantly engage in brand promotion, often on social media platforms where they are vulnerable to public criticism and trolling. The emotional labor required to maintain these personas can detract from focus on sport and academic responsibilities, leading to exhaustion and diminished performance. According to Figure 2, the pie chart shows the percentages of how student-athletes must utilize their NIL. Brands expect a lot of social media usage and to stay active on their personal accounts

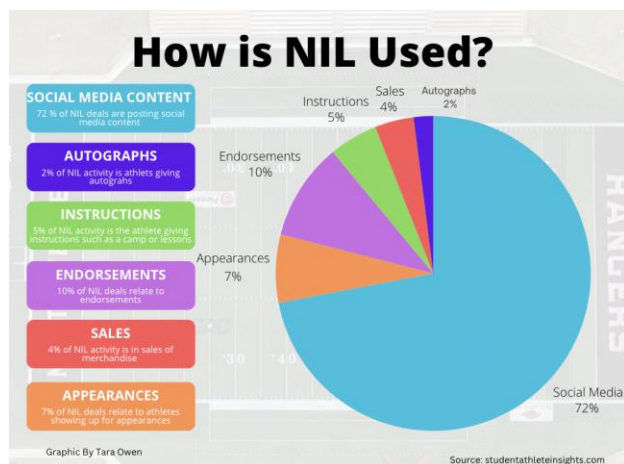


Figure 2

Pie chart showing how student-athletes deals are utilized (Owen, 2024).

Academic and Athletic Performance

The distraction caused by media obligations and harassment can negatively impact both academic and athletic performance. Student-athletes juggling endorsement deals, interviews, and content creation often report reduced study time and increased stress (NCAA, 2023). Moreover, the psychological burden of hostile public interactions may impair concentration and recovery, increasing the risk of injury or burnout. Adding extra priorities onto their education and sports will be very hard on a young student-athlete. These athletes are between the ages of 18-24 and putting too much pressure on them will hurt their mental health. Taking away critical time from their education and athletics will be detrimental to the future of student-athletes. Declining grades, performance, and mental health may cause anxiety, depression, and high stress levels which a young adult cannot handle at this point in their life.

Solutions: Educating the Problem

The problem is student-athletes' mental health is becoming worse and worse due to the media coverage on the athlete. As stated in the methods section, journalists like to use certain ways to cover topics related to drama, scandals, and underperformance. Educating student-athletes on these methods that are used to get more clicks on the articles at the expense of the athlete would honestly be futile. The toxic media will still be put out there with no help and just telling someone to ignore it only does so much. Instead of educating about the problem, educating the problem is the better solution. Presenting the research, real-life examples, and the outcomes to upcoming journalists who are still studying in college would leave a greater impact on the sports media landscape. Targeting the next generation of journalists could save the toxic culture that sports journalism has become, and also the future of these athletes. Teaching them

how their words can make or break not just a player, not just a team, but an athletic program as a whole could really give the next generation a new perspective. It shouldn't be just about the clicks; it should be about helping the student-athlete build an image that people want to see and love. Journalists should shine a light on the athlete instead of the athlete being shunned.

Gambling has always been an issue for decades now, but it is at an all time high in modern times. A fan getting drunk on a saturday night watching Alabama vs. Tennessee. Coincedentally they bet their hard earned money on Alabama to win the game. The kicker lines up the game winning kick. Snap, hold, kick... wide left. He misses the kick. The money that drunk fan bet with is now gone all because the kicker couldn't put it through the uprights from 52 yards away. The gambler goes on his favorite media outlet to post how "bad" the kicker is because he couldn't kick a field goal. He thinks that he could do that. He finds the kicker's profile and decides to spam him with hate messages and maybe even death threats all because of one missed field goal. That is the problem with sports betting in today's world. It is easily accessible to find a student-athlete's profile and send them messages or comments that are just downright cyberbullying. What needs to happen is regulation on gambling in collegiate sports. It is not fair to the young athlete that they can get betted on whether they play well or not. A solution to that is meeting up with state lawmakers because in 39 states it is legal to sports bet. There needs to be laws in place to make it illegal to gamble on collegiate sports to decrease the amount of harrasment the players receive online.

Conclusion

The modern media environment surrounding collegiate sports is complex and multifaceted. While sports journalism and media provide important platforms for recognition and career advancement, they also contribute significantly to the psychological and social pressures faced by student-athletes. Social media forces the student-athletes to create a persona they may not be comfortable in due to trying to keep a certain brand for NIL and a future professional career. Fans joining in on the harassment, abuse, and threats hurts the mentality of student-athletes. Gambling continues to grow and expand towards collegiate sports that causes pressure on the performance of student-athletes due to the fear of online abuse that exceeds cyber-bullying.

Through racially and gender-biased narratives, sensationalism, social media harassment, NIL commercialization, and betting-fueled fan aggression, media coverage often harms the very individuals it claims to celebrate. Addressing these issues requires concerted efforts by media organizations, educational institutions, regulatory bodies, and social media platforms to create safer, more equitable spaces for collegiate athletes. By prioritizing athlete mental health, ethical reporting standards, and comprehensive institutional support, stakeholders can mitigate the negative impacts of sports journalism and help student-athletes thrive both on and off the field.

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