Exploring female collegiate athletes' lived experiences of mental health stigma on social media

1. Project Description

1.a. Description of Project

This study aims to investigate the lived experiences of mental health stigma among female collegiate athletes. Stigma is a multifaceted social construct that leads to negative cognitive and emotional reactions and individual and structural discrimination toward those with a stigmatized identity such as having a mental illness (Link & Phelan, 2001). Mental health stigma can have detrimental effects on individuals with mental illness such as low self-esteem, social isolation, stress, and poor coping strategies (Major & O'Brien, 2005). It is a major barrier to seeking help for mental health issues (Gulliver et al., 2010). This stigma against seeking support for mental health is a common phenomenon among young athletes as they need to show the face of mental toughness (Bird et al., 2021). As suggested by Altemus (2006), females suffer from depression and anxiety at roughly twice the rate of males, and Heidari (2013) points out that female athletes are more prone to burnout and mental health consequences than their male peers. It is crucial for sports and health professionals to be aware of the associated risk factors to look out for, as athletes frequently underreport their mental health issues (De Souza et al. 2021).

Mental health stigma related to social media refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes surrounding mental health issues that are perpetuated and reinforced through online platforms. It involves the marginalization, discrimination, and trivialization of individuals with mental health concerns, leading to their exclusion and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes (Clement et al., 2015). Social media platforms can amplify mental health stigma by providing a space for the dissemination of misinformation, derogatory comments, and harmful content related to mental health (Robinson et al., 2019). These platforms often perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards, promoting the idea that one's worth is determined by one's physical appearance and mental well-being (Fardouly et al., 2015). This can lead to the trivialization of mental health concerns, as individuals may feel pressured to present a perfect image and hide their struggles (Vogel et al., 2015).

Previous research suggests that there is a complex relationship between social media and mental health stigma. While social media can be used to raise awareness of mental health issues and disseminate care messaging through developing an online support community (Smith-Frigerio, 2021), exposure to appearance-focused content on social media has been found to have a detrimental impact on body image and mental health (Perloff, 2014). Kavanagh and colleagues (2019) examined the portrayal of female athletes on social media and found evidence of trivialization and objectification. They also found that female athletes are often subjected to sexualized and demeaning comments, which can contribute to the trivialization of their achievements and abilities.

Keeping this in view, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of female collegiate athletes regarding mental health stigma on social media platforms. The research will draw on the stigma management communication (SMC) theory as a guiding framework (Meisenbach, 2010) to explore these athletes' experiences. The SMC theory aims to enhance the understanding of stigma by examining how it is constructed through communication and influenced by social and cultural factors. It also provides insights into strategies and paths for individuals who experience stigma to manage and navigate the consequences of stigmatization. Researchers have been using the SMC to understand and strategize the mental health stigma of individuals from different groups, occupations, or communities such as veterans (Roscoe, 2021), persons with disabilities (Lash, 2022), recovery communities (O'Shay-Wallace, 2020) among many others.

There are a few studies in the areas of sports and athletes where the SMC has been utilized to understand the state of stigmatization and coping strategies among athletes. This gap presents a unique opportunity for this research to explore the experience of female collegiate athletes' mental health stigma through the lens of the SMC theory. With in-depth exploration, this study seeks to gain valuable insights directly from the athletes themselves, shedding light on their personal encounters with mental health stigma within the social media sphere, their strategies for navigating this stigma, and recommendations on developing and promoting a support system. Understanding these experiences can not only inform targeted interventions and support systems but also contribute to a broader conversation about dismantling stereotypes and prejudices surrounding mental health in sports and social media communication.

1.b. Methodology

This qualitative research aims to explore the experiences of mental health stigma on social media among female collegiate athletes who are currently studying at a college in a midwestern state. The study will employ a one-to-one semi-structured interview approach to gather in-depth and rich data from the research participants. The setting for this research will be a mid-western university campus, specifically targeting female collegiate athletes from various sports teams. Participants will be selected through purposive sampling, ensuring a diverse range of experiences and perspectives.

The sample size will be determined based on data saturation, that is, data will be collected until no new information emerges from the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The number of participants in phenomenological studies varies and depends on the timeline of the project. Considering the timeframe of this project, a minimum of nine interviews will be conducted, as Dukes (1984) suggested studying three to ten participants for phenomenology. The interviews will be audio-recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

The interview questions will be designed to outline participants' experiences with mental health stigma on social media, their stigma management strategies, and their perceptions of the impact of social media on their mental health and well-being. Thematic analysis using a constant-comparative method (Glaser, 1965) will be employed to analyze the data collected from the interviews. The transcripts will be read and re-read to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories related to mental health stigma on social media. Several strategies will be employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, including member checking, peer debriefing, and expert consultations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical considerations will be of utmost importance throughout the research process. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and confidentiality. Participants will be assured of their rights to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. The research will adhere to ethical guidelines and regulations regarding data storage, protection, and anonymity.

The chosen methodological approach of conducting one-to-one interviews was selected over other methods due to its ability to capture rich and detailed narratives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allows for both consistency in the research questions and flexibility to explore individual experiences, ensuring a balance between standardization and individualization. This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the central question, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1.c. Project Timeline

This project has been planned to be completed by April 2024, whereas the proposal submission for GRACA and compliance approvals have been planned to be completed from October to December 2023.

The main activities of this project will be held in February, March, and April 2024 as instructed by the GRACA Application 2023-2024 guidelines. The project timeline and activities have been outlined below-

Months	Deliverables	Activities
Preparatory activities		
October 2023	Proposal and GRACA Application	▪ Finalizing research proposal, including research questions, objectives, and methodology. ▪ Submission for GRACA Application 2023-2024.
November – December 2023	IRB approval	▪ Obtaining necessary compliance approvals from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).
January 2024	Participant outreach and appointment	▪ Conducting targeted outreach, such as contacting athletic units and student organizations, and finalizing appointments with research participants for interviews in February 2024.
Project activities		
February 2024	Data collection	▪ Conducting pilot interviews with a small sample of participants to refine interview protocols and ensure clarity of questions. ▪ Begin data collection by conducting one-to-one interviews with female collegiate athletes and aim to complete at least half of the planned interviews during this month based on the appointments made throughout the outreach in January 2024. ▪ Starting transcribing, and data cleaning simultaneously.
March 2024	Data analysis	▪ Continuing data collection by conducting remaining one-to-one interviews with female collegiate athletes. ▪ Analyzing interview data using thematic analysis techniques for data interpretation and identification of key themes. ▪ Submission for presenting primary findings (to date) at the UNO Student Research and Creative Activity Fair (RCAF) 2024. ▪ Drafting for conference submissions and journal submissions.
April 2024	Final report	▪ Writing the research report based on the findings and preparing the final report for relevant academic journals and conferences.

1.d. Student/Faculty Mentor Roles:

Student: *Md. Sazzad Mahmud Shuvo*, Graduate Student at the UNO School of Communication.
Mr. Shuvo is the primary researcher for this project. His responsibilities include all the necessary tasks for this project such as crafting the theoretical framework and research design, securing IRB approval, conducting semi-structured interviews and data analysis, composing manuscripts and conference abstracts, and preparing for presentation at the UNO RCAF 2024.

Faculty Mentor: *Dr. Roma Subramanian*, Graduate Program Chair and Associate Professor at the UNO School of Communication. Dr. Subramanian will supervise the overall project completion and delivery. She will advise the student on the research design, data collection, and analysis process. She will guide the student in maintaining compliance through IRB. The student will share regular updates with the mentor and assess the periodical progress according to the proposed timeline.

1. e. Previous Internal Funding:
This project did not receive any previous funding.

2. Budget and Budget Justification

The total requested grant for this project is $5000. This budget will be utilized only for the project activities as mentioned in the activity timeline during February-April 2024. The budget includes project hour stipends and stationery costs. The project hours are calculated based on $15 per hour. The detailed budget has been outlined below with justifications-

Months	Deliverables	Time and justification	Cost
Preparatory activities			
October 2023	Proposal and GRACA Application	NA	$0
November – December 2023	IRB approvals	NA	$0
January 2024	Participant outreach and appointment	NA	$0
Project activities			
February 2024	Data collection	▪ <u>Project hour stipends</u>: $1200 80 hours x $15 (4 weeks x 20 hours/week) ▪ <u>Stationery supplies</u>: $100 (Transcription printing and photocopying; pens, pencils, and highlighters for coding; sticky notes, notebooks, planners, etc.)	$1,300
March 2024	Data analysis	▪ <u>Project hour stipend</u>: $1800 120 hours x $15 (4 weeks x 30 hours/week) ▪ <u>Stationery supplies</u>: $50 (Transcription printing and photocopying; pens, pencils, and highlighters for coding; sticky notes, notebooks, planners, etc.)	$1,850
April 2024	Final report	▪ <u>Project hour stipends</u>: $1800 120 hours x $15 (4 weeks x 30 hours/week) ▪ <u>Stationery supplies</u>: $50 (Drafts printing and photocopying; pens, pencils, and highlighters for reviewing; sticky notes, notebooks, planners, etc.)	$1,850
		Total requested budget:	**$5,000**

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Letter of Mentor Support

October 4, 2023

Dear GRACA Selection Committee:

I'm happy to write this letter to support Sazzad Shuvo's application for GRACA funding for his project titled "Exploring female collegiate athletes' lived experiences of mental health stigma on social media." His proposal addresses a critical barrier to seeking healthcare and a fundamental cause of health disparities—stigma—and addresses a topical health issue: the current mental health crisis among young adults and the role of social media in aggravating it. The project will not only give Shuvo valuable research experience but also has the potential to benefit stakeholders in the university and the Omaha community.

Shuvo is well-poised to execute this proposal. He is a second-year MA student who would have completed his coursework by the end of this fall semester, giving him time to focus on this research. Also, he has received training in the research methods (specifically, qualitative methods) that he will be using for this study. He has conducted several research projects during his time in the graduate program at UNO; one of these projects, which was about social media, misinformation, and vaccine hesitancy, received an honorable mention at the 2023 Student Research & Creative Activity Fair. Shuvo's master's thesis is also about social media—specifically, the phenomena of FOMO and JOMO (the fear of missing out and the joy of missing out, respectively). With this project, he will be continuing and building on this stream of research on the role of social media in health and well-being. His proposal is well-developed, thoughtful, and can be completed in the timeline he has proposed. Finally, Shuvo plans to pursue a doctorate in communication, specifically, health communication, after completing his MA. Getting funding for this project would make his Ph.D. applications considerably more competitive.

As the faculty mentor, I'm excited to work with Shuvo. The study he has proposed aligns very well with my own research program in stigma communication. Specifically, my work has examined media representations of mental illness, lived experiences of stigma, and strategies to combat stigma. As a mentor, I have already provided Shuvo with constructive feedback on his proposal. I plan to meet him at regular intervals during the course of this project to ensure that he is advancing toward his goal and to help troubleshoot problems/challenges that may arise.

In closing, I strongly recommend Shuvo for this GRACA grant. If I can provide the selection committee with any other information, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Roma Subramanian, Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Graduate Program Chair
School of Communication, ASH 107-L
Affiliate Faculty, Medical Humanities, Goldstein Center for Human Rights, UNMC IAE, UNL MHDI
Big Ideas Faculty Fellow for Medical Humanities (2020-2022)