

Integrating Social Work with Sport Communications: A Scoping Review and Directions for Future Research and Practice

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Athletes, media outlets, and sport organizations are increasingly discussing mental health via sport communication platforms. Research regarding mental health and sport communication from athletes publicly discussing personal diagnoses or endorsing mental health services, teams promoting mental health campaigns, or media coverage of those topics has followed. However, much of the literature lacks the perspective of mental health professionals, specifically social workers. Therefore, the purpose of this work was two-fold: (a) review the literature at the intersection of mental health and sport communications, and (b) recommend future directions to involve sport social work scholars and practitioners. A scoping review included 27 articles published since 2000. A thematic analysis of the findings resulted in the construction of 4 themes: (1) positive and neutral sentiments toward athlete disclosures, (2) difference in response or coverage based on outlet, (3) changes in media narrative and sport culture, and (4) the role of race and gender in disclosures. Theoretical and methodological gaps were also identified along with future directions for the sport social work field. Specifically, because of the multisystem impact of communication efforts and concerns around ineffective mental health messaging in sport communications, social workers should focus on this burgeoning field of research and practice.

Keywords: Mental health, communications, social work, scoping review, sport

The World Health Organization (WHO; 2022) defines mental health as:

...a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development (para. 2)

Athletes are a unique population that possesses increased risk for diminished mental health due to sport-specific risk factors (Dean & Rowan, 2014). In particular, sport culture has prioritized hypermasculine ideals (e.g., playing through pain; Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019). As such, issues of diminished mental health within sport have long been undisclosed, overlooked, ignored, or silenced (Bauman, 2016). Despite mental health stigma in sport, athletes and sport entities have increasingly discussed mental health via sport communications (e.g., athlete mental health diagnosis disclosure, awareness campaigns). For example, National Basketball Association (NBA) players DeMar DeRozan and Kevin Love, challenged stereotypes and stigma related to mental health in 2018 when both athletes used public mediums (i.e., *The Player's Tribune* and X) to discuss their mental health (Lee, 2018). Michael Phelps released his documentary, *The Weight of Gold*, which explored the challenges with mental health experienced by Olympic athletes (Bieler, 2020).

Sport organizations have also demonstrated the importance of mental health in their communications and publicly shared resources. For instance, as part of the NBA's Mind Health program, people can access mental health resources through an NBA-sponsored and branded website (<https://mindhealth.nba.com/>; NBA Mind Health, n.d.). At the collegiate level, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) provides tips to help athletes, teams, member institutions, and conferences create social media mental health campaigns (NCAA, n.d.).

Such efforts may impact internal and external stakeholders because elite, high-performance sport solidifies neoliberal beliefs, which are dominant in Western cultures (Coakley, 2011). A way through which these values are reinforced is through sports media (Broussard, 2020). Because of the vast impact of communication efforts, it is imperative to understand the effects of sport entities' communications from a multitude of vantage points. As such, this work has two purposes: (1) provide a scoping review of the existing literature on sport communications and mental health, and (2) assess ways in which mental health professionals, specifically social workers, can enhance work in this burgeoning field of study and practice.

Social Work

Overall, the purpose of social work is to enhance human wellbeing with a particular focus on vulnerable populations (NASW, n.d.). Because of the unique pressures of athletics, social work and sport is a growing field of study and practice (Newman et al., 2022). Social work interventions are commonly provided at the micro- (e.g., education to athletes; Newman et al., 2024) and mesosystem levels (e.g., interaction of coach and mental health professional; Saxe et al., 2022) within sport settings. However, to date, limited research has addressed exosystem (e.g., athletic department) interventions. Similarly, there have been concentrated efforts to educate athletes and coaches on best mental health practices within organizations, but less attention has

been provided to others within a sport organization (e.g., administrators; Beasley et al., 2023). Despite the current gaps in research and practice, social workers' commitment to an ecological systems perspective well-positions social work scholars and practitioners to address exosystem and macrosystem level concerns within sport (Newman et al., 2022). Communication channels can serve as a micro-, meso-, and exolevel intervention, which can impact mental health stigma in sport culture (Bunch et al., 2024). As such, social workers must increasingly attend to communication efforts at the intersection of mental health.

Sport Communication

In totality, sport industry communications continue to reach some of the largest audiences, despite fragmentation in media consumption (Wenner, 2012). The current study centers on the mass media components of sport communications, as defined by Pedersen and colleagues (2007). This includes any front-facing and widespread messaging effort (e.g., reporting, campaigns, press releases, press conferences, etc.), across any platform (e.g., news outlets, social media, websites, television, blogs, advertising, etc.). Such communication efforts can originate from numerous actors (e.g., athletes, organizations, leagues, journalists, commentators, etc.). Aside from curating content regarding the sport itself (e.g., game recaps, player highlights), sport communications may discuss societal issues and influence cultural values (Evens et al., 2013). For example, sport organizations have engaged in conversations around race-related activism (Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022), journalists have discussed LGBTQ issues (Moscowitz et al., 2018), and athletes have challenged mental health stigma (e.g., Naomi Osaka, Michael Phelps).

Mental health is increasingly discussed within sport media. Despite the systematic and scoping reviews conducted in other facets of mental health and sport research (e.g., Bu et al., 2020; Frost et al., 2024; Perry et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2016, etc.) and literature examining the use of sport communication to address other social issues (e.g., racism, LGBTQ inclusion, environmental concerns, etc.; Broussard, 2020; Rizvi, 2021), there has yet to be a review of literature conducted for mental health and sport communication research, despite the importance of sport media in disrupting or reproducing mental health stigma (Bunch et al., 2024). The Alliance of Social Workers in Sports' guiding principles call those within the field to address "the need for competency and integrity in practice, research, and advocacy" and to engage in the "quest for cultural competency" (ASWIS, n.d.). With those principles at the forefront, the following research questions sought to ensure robust and competent research and practice at the intersection of sport communication and mental health.

RQ1: What peer-reviewed literature exists at the intersection of mental health and sport communications in English language journals between 2000-2024?

RQ2: What were the key findings in the existing literature?

RQ3: What are the methodological and thematic gaps in the existing literature?

RQ4: How can sport social work scholars and practitioners enhance work at the intersection of mental health and sport communication?

Method

A scoping review was conducted to examine existing literature that addresses the intersection of mental health and sport communications. Scoping reviews are a tool used to

comprehensively assess the current literature on a specific topic. Munn and colleagues (2018) suggest that a scoping review is an appropriate method for assessing literature in emerging fields, such as mental health in sport communications. The primary goals of conducting a scoping review include identifying available evidence, research methods, and knowledge gaps (Munn et al., 2018). Comparatively, systematic reviews assess the quality of current work, investigate conflicting results, confirm current practice, and identify new implications for practice (Munn et al., 2018).

There is not a singular way to conduct a scoping review (Dowling et al., 2018). This paper follows the guidelines of Arksey and O'Malley (2005). As such, the review consisted of the following stages: (1) define the research questions, (2) determine relevant studies, (3) select the studies, (4) extract literature, and (5) summarize the findings. Similar to Dowling and colleagues (2018), the research team conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to examine the existing literature. Specifically, the current thematic analysis summarizes findings, addresses methodological and theoretical gaps, and identifies future directions for research and practice.

Data Collection

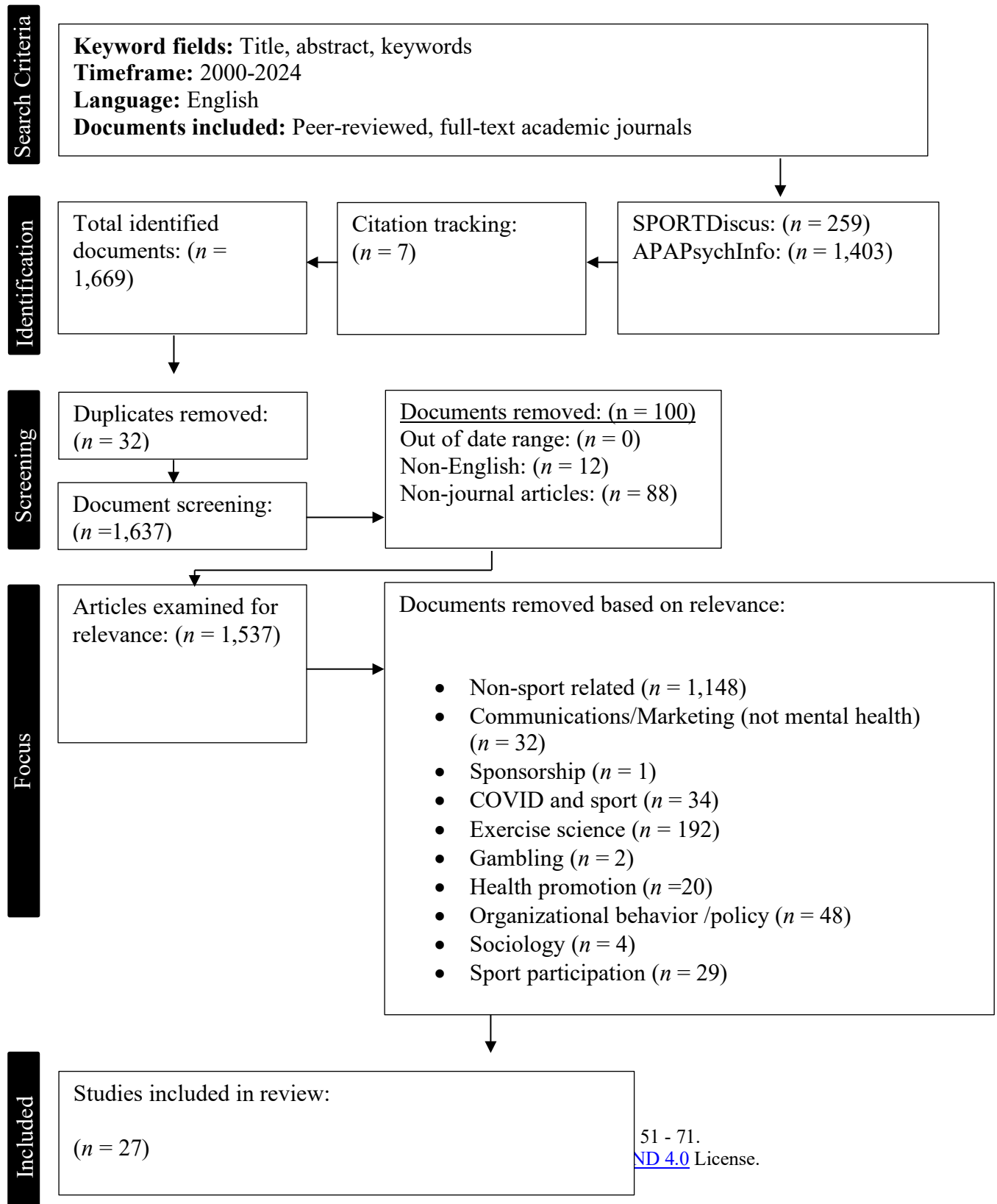
After defining the research questions, relevant studies were identified through two sources: electronic databases (APA PsycInfo and SportDiscus) and reference list checks. Interested in academic literature, the researchers chose to analyze articles published in English language peer-review journals between 2000 and 2024. Based on discussions amongst the research team, the following key search words were agreed upon to adequately address the scope of the present literature search: “mental health” AND “sport” OR “athlete” OR “coach” OR “sport organization” OR “team”, AND “media” OR “journalism” OR “press” OR “social media” OR “branding” OR “response.”

APA PsycInfo and SportDiscus, two electronic databases, were searched based upon the keywords in key fields. The search was further narrowed based on timeframe (2000-2024), article type (full-length, peer-reviewed, journal articles), and language (English). The timeframe of this review was chosen to ensure the inclusion of all relevant and up-to-date literature, like the recent review of literature assessing coaches and mental health research (Frost et al., 2024). The reference lists of identified articles were checked for articles that did not appear in the initial search. Lastly, the research team was comprised of all English speakers. As such, only articles written in English were assessed, which is a limitation of this review.

The search resulted in 1403 articles from APA PsycInfo, 259 from SportDiscus, and seven from reference list searches for a total of 1669 articles. Once articles were identified, the lead author then selected studies for review. First, duplicates were removed ($n = 32$). Next, articles were checked to ensure that they met the agreed-upon inclusion criteria (i.e., academic journal, English articles, etc.). This led to the removal of an additional 100 articles. Next, the lead author checked remaining articles for conceptual relevance. A total of 1510 articles were removed due to the focus not being within the scope of this review. A majority of articles were removed for being non-sport-related ($n = 1148$). Sport-related articles were removed if the focus was on exercise science, sport participation, and COVID-19, among other topics. Articles were also removed if the focus was on policy or the impact of social media usage on athletes' mental health, which are forms of communication. However, based on the operationalized definition of sport communication in this study (i.e., front-facing and widespread messaging effort), policy

and individual social media usage focused works were not considered. Ultimately, a total of 27 articles were included in the analysis. An illustration of the review process is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Determination of Relevant Studies and Study Selection



In extracting and summarizing the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), the researchers compiled and quantified the following information for each article via Excel: authors and country represented, year of publication, journal title, theoretical framework(s), and employed method(s). This process answered RQ1, which aimed to describe existing peer-reviewed literature at the intersection of mental health and sport communications. Next, the research team conducted an inductive analysis of the findings and discussion sections of the articles to answer RQ2, which sought to synthesize current key findings. The thematic analysis allowed the researchers to identify the gaps in the existing literature (RQ3) and provide practice and research recommendations (RQ4). The lead researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2019) iterative approach to thematic analysis. First, the lead author read the articles' findings and discussion sections to become familiar with the data. Upon the next reading of the articles, the author began creating initial codes based on the findings of the data, which led to the creation of themes. These themes were presented to the remainder of the research team along with the articles. Once the research team had time to familiarize themselves with the articles and read the proposed themes, the authors met to refine the definitions of the themes. The research team met until a consensus was reached. Ultimately, four themes were constructed: (1) positive and neutral sentiments toward athlete disclosures, (2) difference in response or coverage based on outlet, (3) changes in media narrative and sport culture, and (4) the role of race and gender in disclosures. These themes are defined and outlined in the findings below.

After identifying the themes in the key findings, the research team engaged in debriefing sessions to discuss and identify the existing gaps in the literature and to discern pertinent recommendations for future research (Spall, 1998). This resulted in the identification of three key gaps and directions for future scholars and practitioners. The provided scoping review is not without limitations. First, the review only includes articles written in English. Therefore, the selection of articles may not be representative of every published work. As such, the articles centered on American and British athletes and their experiences. An expanded version of this literature review should be conducted to understand mental health and sport communications across cultures.

Findings

RQ1: Characteristics of Peer-Reviewed Literature

The results of RQ1 provide insight into the state of current literature that addresses the intersection of sport communications and mental health. Relevant articles were first published in 2014. However, research in this space was not consistent until 2020 (See Table 1). This result was not surprising as mental health is increasingly being considered an important component of overall health (Mance, 2022). Within the context of sport, the increased research also aligns with athletes disclosing their mental health concerns and diagnoses at a heightened rate. Kevin Love and DeMar DeRozan, some of the first athletes to publicly discuss their mental health, spoke out in 2018, with more athletes speaking out since (e.g., Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, Naomi Osaka, etc.). As conversations around mental health continue to occur over general media (Smit, 2024) and sport communication efforts (i.e., Pro Athlete Awareness Week), it is reasonable to believe that continued research in this area is necessary and will continue to increase.

Table 1
Key Features of Reviewed Mental Health and Sport Communication Articles

Author(s) (Year)	Focus of Article	Theoretical Foundation	Method/Methodology	Journal
Bunch, Beasley, & Copple (2024)	Media framing	Ecological Systems Theory	Critical Discourse Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication & Sport</i>
Cassilo (2022)	Media framing	Framing/Hegemonic Masculinity	Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Cassilo & Kluch (2023)	Media framing	Framing	Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Else, Southwood, Winter, Thomas, Litchfield, Ogwen, & Billington (2024)	Media framing	N/A	Ethnographic Observation	<i>Sport in Society</i>
Feng & Duncan (2024)	Media framing	N/A	Critical Discourse Analysis	<i>Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health</i>
Jackson, Dirks, & Billings (2022)	Media framing	Social Identity Theory/Framing	Quantitative Content Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>
Keal, McCabe, Wright, & Renshaw (2022)	Media framing	N/A	Thematic Analysis	<i>Sports Psychiatry</i>
Fedorosko & Bishop (2021)	Media framing	N/A	Narrative Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Lavelle (2021)	Media framing	Hegemonic Masculinity/Whiteness	Critical Discourse Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
McGannon, Staden, & McMahon (2022)	Media framing	N/A	Narrative Analysis	<i>Journal of Applied Sport Psychology</i>
Parrott (2024)	Media framing	Framing	Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Parrott, Billings, Buzzelli, & Towery (2021)	Media framing	Framing/Social Cognitive	Content Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Parry, Brain, Jull, & Smith (2023)	Media framing	Framing	Thematic Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>
Thompson, Carter, Lee, Alshamrani, & Billings (2022)	Media framing	Framing	Quantitative Content Analysis	<i>Electronic News: Broadcast and Mobile Journalism</i>
Vaccaro & Butryn (2020)	Media framing	N/A	Ethnographic Content Analysis	<i>Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal</i>
Cameron & Grano (2023)	Athlete disclosure	Co-Cultural Theory	Phenomenological Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication Studies</i>
Else (2019)	Athlete disclosure	N/A	Ethnomethodology/Conversation Analysis	<i>Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health</i>
Else, Winter, Litchfield, Ogwen, & Southwood (2023)	Athlete disclosure	N/A	Ethnomethodology/Conversation Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Kwak & Jang (2024)	Athlete disclosure	Social Cognitive Theory	Experimental Design	<i>Sport Management Review</i>
Lavelle (2022)	Athlete disclosure	Critical Race Theory	Discourse Analysis	<i>Howard Journal of Communications</i>
Parrott (2023)	Athlete disclosure	Stigma Communication	Thematic Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>

Chen & Kwak (2023)	Social media response	N/A	Quantitative Thematic and Sentiment Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Doehler (2023)	Social media response	Framing	Leximancer/Quantitative Content Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>
Kumble, Diddi, & Bien-Aime (2024)	Social media response	N/A	Machine Learning Thematic Analysis	<i>Communication & Sport</i>
Mitchell, Santarossa, & Woodruff (2018)	Social media response	N/A	Quantitative Content/Social Network Analysis	<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>
Parrott, Billings, Hakim, & Gentile (2020)	Social media response	N/A	Quantitative Content Analysis	<i>Reports</i>
Lindsay & Thomas (2014)	Reflection from mental health professional	N/A	Autoethnography	<i>The Sport Psychologist</i>

Bibliographic Details

Much of the research in this space has been published in sport communication-focused journals, specifically *Communication & Sport* ($n = 9$) and the *International Journal of Sport Communication* ($n = 6$). Notably, only three articles were published in psychology or psychiatry journals. Social work journals were not represented in this review. The articles were authored by 53 individuals, who represented institutions from five countries: Australia ($n = 1$), Canada ($n = 7$), South Korea ($n = 1$), United Kingdom ($n = 16$), and United States ($n = 28$).

Theoretical Frameworks

The literature sample primarily focused on the coverage of, or response to, individual athlete mental health disclosures. Because of the purpose of the literature, the most common theoretical perspective in the literature was framing theory ($n = 8$). Half of the articles did not have a stated theoretical foundation ($n = 14$). The remainder of theoretical frameworks used are provided in Table 1.

Research Methods

In terms of method, qualitative methods were employed in 80% of the articles. Most commonly, a form of thematic analysis was used. Certain qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, were not employed. Overall, quantitative methods were undertaken in six of the publications. There was limited use of intervention methodologies (i.e., randomized control), and only one article used an experimental design.

In answering part of RQ3, the existing work exhibited limited diversity in terms of methodological and theoretical approaches. In terms of method, most of the studies employed a qualitative approach. Specifically, thematic analysis (e.g., Cassilo, 2022a; Cassilo & Kluch, 2023; Keal et al., 2022) was the most used technique. Only one study used an autoethnography (Lindsay & Thomas, 2014), two conversational analysis and ethnomethodology (Elsey et al., 2023; Elsey et al., 2024), and three used critical discourse analysis (Bunch et al., 2024; Feng & Duncan, 2024; Lavelle, 2021). In terms of quantitative designs, Kwak and Jang (2024) used an

experimental design to discern consumers' perceptions of warmth and competence upon an athlete's mental health disclosure. Additionally, their work evaluated the effect of a sponsor's stance toward athlete mental health on brand authenticity. Clinical intervention studies could push the literature forward to explore if sport mental health communications can increase viewers' mental health literacy and decrease stigma.

Much of the work ($n = 14$) did not have a theoretical foundation. In regard to studies that used theory, framing theory was the most widely used, which may not be surprising as thematic and content analysis were common methodological choices. However, the similar nature of the existing work leads to limited perspectives and insights. Only one article used Critical Race Theory (Lavelle, 2022), one piece used Co-Cultural Theory (Cameron & Grano, 2023), and one used Ecological Systems Theory (Bunch et al., 2024). Future research would benefit from using social work theories, such as more use of ecological systems theory, to understand the systems impact of mental health communications in sport contexts.

RQ2: Key Findings of the Articles

The inductive analysis of the articles and their key findings resulted in the construction of four themes: (1) positive and neutral sentiments toward athlete disclosures, (2) differences in response or coverage based on outlet, (3) changes in media narrative and sport culture, and (4) the role of race and gender in disclosures.

Theme 1: Positive and Neutral Sentiments Toward Athlete Disclosures

Analysis of media framing and public responses to athlete mental health disclosures was central to the literature. Current literature at the intersection of mental health and sport communications consistently finds that athletes garnered positive or neutral responses on media coverage after their mental health disclosure (e.g., Chen & Kwak, 2023; Keal et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2018; Parrott et al., 2021). This is not to dismiss negative frames or commentary that athletes did receive. However, it was apparent that positive or neutral sentiments were a profound finding across the literature. There was a plethora of ways in which athletes received positive attention for their mental health disclosure. McGannon and colleagues' (2022) evaluation of news stories around Andrew Luck's retirement illustrated praise for vulnerability. Other athletes were regarded in a heroic light (Thompson et al., 2022) and recognized as breaking mental health stigma (Cassilo, 2022a; Kumble et al., 2024; Lavelle, 2022). As stigma was being challenged, athletes also garnered words of support (Cassilo & Kluch, 2023; Doehler, 2023) and encouraged others to share their experiences with diminished mental health (Kumble et al., 2024; Parrott et al., 2020). Kwak and Jang's (2024) experimental design demonstrated that sport consumers assess athlete mental health disclosures with greater warmth compared to physical injuries. This finding was particularly true for more prominent athletes. Overall, existing literature well establishes that athletes are often supported in their mental health disclosures through media coverage and consumer response.

Notably, a majority of the current literature does not critically examine the positive nature of media coverage or response. As such, most positive response is viewed as empowering. However, Van Beveren and colleagues (2020) warn against viewing discourse as "exclusively stigmatizing or exclusively empowering and normalizing" (p. 1362). Despite the benefits of a strengths-perspective, *toxic* positivity in overall health communications may misconstrue the

reality of living with an illness or disease. Scholars have found that people responding to posts related to living with endometriosis often reinforce the belief that the only way to “defeat” the disease is through positive thinking, which is unrealistic (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). Furthermore, because the glamorization of mental health concerns and death by suicide is an issue in mass media (Jadayel et al., 2017; Parrott, 2024), it is scholars’ duty to ensure the “positive” coverage is not romanticizing mental health diagnosis. Therefore, the presence of positive responses in the existing literature should not be viewed in a homogenous nature.

Beyond glamorization and toxic positivity, the complexities of mental health should not be overly simplified through media communications. Within this context, Bunch and colleagues (2024) examined how Stanford’s response to the passing of Katie Meyer, although seemingly positive, may have reinforced mental health stigma and the over-identification with athlete identity. Lavelle (2021) briefly discussed this issue in the context of athlete mental health disclosures, stating that media discussion that hyper focuses on the environmental factors which attribute to diminished mental health downplays the complexities around diagnosis. As such, future scholars should increase the critical examination of positivity and nature of the coverage or responses to athlete mental health disclosures.

Theme 2: Difference in Response and Coverage Based on Outlet

Despite the overall positive sentiments toward mental health disclosures, differences in response and coverage based on the reporting outlet were a consistent finding in the literature. For instance, Chen and Kwak (2023) identified that after Naomi Osaka’s withdrawal from the French Open, responses to media outlets’ coverage were less positive than those replying directly to Osaka’s messages. Similarly, Doehler (2023) evaluated the coverage and subsequent response to Facebook coverage of Simone Biles’ withdrawal from the Olympics through CNN, Fox News, Bleacher Report, and her own posts. Once again, the most supportive responses appeared in the replies directly to Biles. The least supportive responses were generated from those replying to the Fox News coverage.

In regard to traditional media formats, mental health disclosures may differ based on the country of the coverage. For illustration, the United Kingdom’s newspaper coverage of Biles’ withdrawal from the Olympics mentioned Biles’ race less compared to the coverage in the United States. Lastly, Elsey (2019) and Elsey et al. (2023) have explored the media ethics surrounding team and organization disclosures of athlete mental health. There is not one best media practice. However, sport organizations and athletes must consider timing, content, and boundaries between public and private matters (Elsey et al., 2023). Elsey and colleagues (2023) caution against sport organizations and teams disclosing an athlete’s mental health diagnoses without the athlete’s permission or counsel (Elsey et al., 2023). In terms of content, athletes should, “(when possible)...speak plainly and frankly in these circumstances” (Elsey et al., 2023, p. 503). As such, because of the range of responses based on reporting outlets, researchers have provided key insights and strategies for disclosing mental health diagnoses.

Theme 3: Changes in Sport Culture and Narratives Around Mental Health

The third theme suggests that sport culture and media coverage of mental health are changing. This theme does not intend to downplay the ongoing mental health stigma that remains. However, evidence suggests that there are improvements. For instance, Cassilo and

Kluch's (2023) examination of the media framing of current NBA player D.J. Carton's exit from Ohio State University supports this by highlighting coaches' increased willingness and desire to discuss mental health.

In terms of media coverage, there was more evidence to suggest changing narratives. Parry and colleagues (2023) examined the media framing of athletes' mental health across three outlets in the United Kingdom from 2000-2019. The results suggest that over time reporters had increased their engagement with official sources (e.g., psychologists), using more specific terminology to discuss diagnoses, acknowledging the need for education and support, and calling attention to changing sport culture. However, this finding is not consistent, as Keal and colleagues (2022) found that journalists covering the 2020 Olympics favored generalized language and did not discuss specific diagnoses, symptoms, or experiences. Therefore, it is evident that despite increased instances of discussing mental health in media, best practices on how to cover athlete mental health are still not universally known, and organizations would benefit from a mental health professional, such as a social worker, assisting in educating communicators on mental health language, helping frame messaging, etc. In this vein, when discussing athlete suicide specifically, Parrott (2023) suggests that journalists consult relevant groups (i.e., Reporting on Suicide or Society of Professional Journalists) to ensure sensitization does not occur and best practices are followed. Inconsistency in discussing mental health is not limited to media coverage from external sources. Athletes often vary in how they discuss their mental health. For example, Kevin Love's essay, while openly discussing his experiences with panic attacks, does not detail the specifics of a clinical anxiety or panic disorder diagnosis (Lavelle, 2021). Whereas Liz Cabbage provided vivid details about her experiences managing her mental health with medication (Lavelle, 2022). The inconsistent nature of coverage and disclosures lends itself to future research opportunities.

Theme 4: The Role of Race and Gender in Disclosures

Despite the generally positive and neutral sentiments, racism, sexism, and intersectionality impacted athlete disclosures of mental health diagnoses. Regarding male athletes, there have been extensive comparisons between the mental health disclosures of NBA players Kevin Love (a white player) and DeMar DeRozan (a Black player). DeRozan came forward with depression first but was only mentioned on ESPN 11 times compared to 70 mentions about Love. Furthermore, despite the proximity of their disclosures, Love was coined the face of mental health in the NBA (Lavelle, 2021). Additionally, Love had increased corporate support from sponsors, which demonstrates white privilege within the NBA (Lavelle, 2021). Because of evidence that race may impact reaction and response to athlete mental health disclosures and coverage, several scholars have called for future research to continue to evaluate the impact of race on such communications efforts (e.g., Cassilo & Kluch, 2023).

Responses to mental health disclosures are also impacted by the gender of the athlete. For example, the media response to Suzy Favor Hamilton's memoir about her bipolar disorder and experiences as an escort in Las Vegas often used gendered language and ideology to negatively portray her (Vaccaro & Butryn, 2020). Favor Hamilton was criticized for dismissing her role as a mother and a wife (Vaccaro & Butryn, 2020). Furthermore, her image was discussed as not fixable, unlike how male counterparts are described after a sex scandal (Vaccaro & Butryn, 2020). Feng and Duncan (2024) discussed the difference between journalists' coverage of male and female athletes with eating disorders. Journalists upheld hegemonic masculinity by using

words of virtue and strength when describing male athletes. However, when discussing female athletes, messages of fragility and inability to manage behavior were used. With reported differences between the coverage and response to male and female mental health, there are existing calls to further examine the impact of gender, mental health, sport, and the media (Else et al., 2023).

It is imperative to also consider the intersectional experiences, particularly those of Black women, because “Black women are frequently encouraged to compartmentalize their emotions and mental health stressors instead of expressing them” (Lavelle, 2022, p. 514). Lavelle (2022) examined media accounts of Liz Cambage’s (a former WNBA player’s) mental health disclosure through counter storytelling. Furthermore, Cameron and Grano (2023) examined Black WNBA players’ long-form mental health disclosures. Findings from both studies suggest that athletes were disrupting existing stereotypes and discourses. Cameron and Grano (2023) suggest that by disclosing specific triggers and turning points in their mental health, Black women combat notions of self-isolation and hyper-productivity, which are normalized for Black women. Lavelle (2022) revealed that Cambage’s disclosures demonstrated that a female athlete can be successful while managing her mental health. In evaluating responses to mental health disclosures, a handful of commenters of Fox News’ coverage of Simone Biles’s withdrawal from the Olympics responded with blatantly racist commentary (Doehler, 2023). Scholars have begun to evaluate different populations as well, such as Chen and Kwak’s (2023) work on Naomi Osaka’s (an Asian and Black female) withdrawal from tennis. However, further intersectional work should continue to be conducted (Lavelle, 2022).

RQ3: Methodological and Theoretical Gaps in the Literature

The evaluation of the methodological and theoretical approaches to the existing literature led to the identification of the following patterns: 1) limited variation in approach (discussed in RQ1), 2) the centering of athletes, and (3) lack of diversity in data sources.

The Centering of Athletes in the Literature

Athletes and the responses to their mental health disclosures served as the focal point of much of the existing literature. In particular, the experiences of Simone Biles (gymnastics), DeMar DeRozan (NBA), and Kevin Love (NBA) were the most discussed and the focus of two or more articles each. Other athletes included in the research were Liz Cambage (WNBA), Suzy Hamilton (runner), Royce White (NBA), Naomi Osaka (women’s tennis), D.J. Carton (NCAA men’s basketball), Andrew Luck (NFL), Jimmy Piersall (MLB), Michael Phelps (swimming), Aaron Lennon (Everton football player), Sarah Taylor (Sussex and England cricketer), Joey Julius (NCAA football), and Mike Marjama (MLB). The evaluation of athletes is undoubtedly important. However, there are other key individuals who require scholarly attention.

Coaches, other members of an organization, or an organization itself may publicly address mental health. Evaluation of coaches is particularly pertinent because current literature suggests that coaches are impactful on athlete health (Gerber et al., 2024) and are increasingly communicating about mental health (Cassilo & Kluch, 2023). For example, the autoethnographic account of Pete Lindsay’s time as a resident mental health professional working in television broadcasting during a sporting world championship suggested that psychologists who are involved in sport media should evaluate their personal motives, agree upon content with the

production team, and seek support from peers both in psychology and communications (Lindsay & Thomas, 2014). Furthermore, communication scholars have warned against performative communication from sport organizations across other social issues (i.e., Black Lives Matter activism; Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022). As such, Bunch and colleagues (2024) implore college sport communicators to specifically name diagnoses, provide calls-to-action, and avoid messaging that overvalues athlete identity. Elsey and colleagues (2024) suggest that mental health campaigns must have a clear goal, target audience, and consistent messaging. Furthermore, action steps must explicitly be named to best help audience members. Overall, it is important to evaluate how other industry professionals and sport organizations address mental health and the subsequent response. Such insights would create more comprehensive literature.

Lack of Diversity in Data Sources

Because of the limited variation in research approach and focus, most studies used similar data sources. Primarily, newspaper/media articles and social media coverage of athlete mental health disclosures were common sources of data. For example, newspaper coverage was used in the examination of Michael Phelps as a mental health advocate (Jackson et al., 2022). Further newspaper articles were used in the examination of how mental health was portrayed during the Tokyo Olympics by two United Kingdom-based newspaper outlets (Keal et al., 2022). More broadly, media articles (e.g., digital media, press releases) were used as the primary data source in the investigation of the framing around D.J. Carton's exit from collegiate basketball due to mental health (Cassilo & Kluch, 2023). Additionally, Lavelle's (2022) examination of the discourse used around Liz Cambage's mental health disclosures used 29 popular press articles as the primary data source. Chen and Kwak (2023) used X to analyze conversations around Naomi Osaka's mental health disclosure. Another social media example includes Doehler's (2023) analysis of Facebook coverage around Simone Biles' withdrawal from the Olympics. Despite the extensive evaluation of media coverage, broadcasts, radio transcripts, and the evaluation of docuseries are largely missing.

There were a handful of works that used varying data sources. Thompson and colleagues examined the coverage of Simone Biles' exit from the Olympics through newspaper articles, television broadcasts, and radio transcripts (2022). Elsey and colleagues (2024) evaluated the implementation of a mental health campaign by the Football Association through assessments of radio coverage, television coverage, social media posts, and in-game communications. Meanwhile, Cameron and Grano (2023) used podcast episodes in their analysis of the communicative practices used by Black women athletes to disclose mental health. It is pertinent to branch into other forms of coverage, such as podcasting, as each platform elicits a different mode of communication. For example, podcasting is viewed as a "hyper-intimate" communication form and is useful in sharing stories around sensitive topics (Cameron & Grano, 2023; Meserko, 2014). Although this group of authors expanded the scope of data, other gaps remain. For instance, first-hand accounts of athletes disclosing mental health challenges were absent, as interviews or focus groups were not used in the studies. Additionally, as athletes increasingly partner with mental health services, the communications surrounding these partnerships were missing as data sources.

RQ4: Directions for Social Work Scholars and Practitioners

An objective of this paper was to inform social work scholars and practitioners to better research and work at the intersection of sport communications and mental health. Sport social workers are charged with ensuring competency in practice, research and advocacy (ASWIS, n.d.). The following directions address this call within sport communications and mental health.

Sport Social Work Scholarship and Practice: Embrace Interdisciplinary Work

This work highlights the need for interdisciplinary collaboration in research and practice between sport administration, communication, and mental health scholars and professionals. Much of the research in this space is written solely by sport management or communications scholars, and none to date has been published in social work journals. However, due to the complexity of mental health and sport communications, scholars should engage in interdisciplinary research. Doherty (2013) states:

Interdisciplinary research is useful, even necessary for addressing complex problems. We can think of high-profile issues, such as smoking cessation, climate change, and the AIDS epidemic, for which it has come to be realized that an interdisciplinary perspective is necessary to ‘join the cracks’ and bridge knowledge gaps about the underlying mechanisms and effective management of these issues (p. 3, para. 7).

Within the academy, interdisciplinary research can prove difficult because scholars may feel uncomfortable embracing a new perspective or negotiating with colleagues in another discipline. Furthermore, a scholar’s institution of employment may not embrace or support interdisciplinary research (Doherty, 2013). However, increased interdisciplinary collaboration will lead to the production of more comprehensive research. This call echoes the need for more interdisciplinary research in social justice, communication, and sport scholarship (Jackson et al., 2020; Obregon & Tuft, 2017).

Social work scholars can ensure more competent research at the intersection of mental health and sport communication because of their commitment to a systems perspective (Newman et al., 2022) and mental health expertise, which is largely missing from the literature. Broadly, scholars are encouraged to move beyond the examination of mental health disclosures, which has been the primary focus of mental health and sport communications work. As such, social work scholars should ensure stakeholders across systems are centered in future scholarship (e.g., coaches, social workers tasked with helping communication efforts, communicators, etc.). A systems perspective can also provide a more nuanced understanding of intersectionality. Specifically, gender and race have proven to impact athlete mental health disclosures; increased research should focus on the intersections of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic whiteness in the discussion of mental health.

In addition to a systems perspective, social work scholars possess mental health expertise and training. Therefore, with a social work perspective, literature at the intersection of mental health and sport can become more accurate, responsible, and robust. In terms of competency, social work scholars may be more attuned to potential issues with mental health communication efforts (e.g., romanticization, glamorization of mental health diagnoses) compared to sport administration and communication peers. For robustness, social work scholars can explore

mental health and sport communication efforts across different mental health diagnoses. Currently, much of the work centers on athletes' anxiety or depression diagnoses. However, athletes are susceptible to other mental health diagnoses (e.g., eating disorders, substance abuse, etc.; Ströhle, 2019). Despite these mental health diagnoses being known to sport social workers and discussed in the media, scholarship has not comprehensively addressed the impact of such communication. For example, more pieces could explore media response to athletes with bipolar disorder, such as Vaccaro and Butryn's (2020) work regarding Suzy Favor Hamilton and the release of her memoir, or the representation of athletes with eating disorders (Feng & Duncan, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2018).

Lastly, social workers in sport are charged with cultivating cultural competency (ASWIS, n.d.). Because digital interventions can increase mental health literacy (Ito-Jaeger, 2022) and sport communications impact healthy behaviors broadly (Pilar et al., 2018), the effectiveness of mental health communications in sport must be assessed. As mental health communications may lead stakeholders to overinterpret mild mental symptoms for something more serious, which in turn can lead to increased psychological distress (Foulkes & Andrews, 2023), it is prudent to examine stakeholders' self-reflection upon reading sport communications efforts that address mental health. Similarly, athletes and other sport entities are continuing to partner with mental health organizations. It is pertinent to understand if these partnerships and their associated communications challenge stigma, encourage more consumers to use these products, and increase overall mental health literacy. Additionally, researchers have provided communications personnel with advice on how to discuss mental health (Parrott et al., 2021; Parrott et al., 2023; Parrott, 2024). However, the effectiveness of such strategies within the sport environment has not been assessed. Sport social work scholars should increasingly evaluate the effectiveness of communication efforts as an intervention, which can yield academic and practice implications.

Practitioners: Increase Integration Between Social Work and Exosystem Actors in Sport

The vision of the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport is to integrate social work practice within all realms of sports to increase well-being outcomes (ASWIS, n.d.). Additionally, ensuring integrity and competency in practice is a shared responsibility of sport social workers (ASWIS, n.d.). Therefore, collaboration with exosystem actors (e.g., administrators, communicators, etc.) should also be valued as a potential site for advancing well-being. Based on the relative novelty of sport social work, practitioners may face colleagues who misunderstand or delegitimize their role within the organization (Beasley et al., 2021). Knowing this, social work practitioners must build relationships with their colleagues. Specifically, this research brings attention to the importance of collaboration with sport communicators.

Sport communications continue to be one of the most visible platforms (Wenner, 2012) and have the potential to serve as a multisystem site to disrupt mental health stigma and increase public awareness and mental health literacy. As such, it is imperative for sport social workers to engage in practices to ensure responsible and destigmatizing content creation. The findings of the scoping review indicate that content creators are not all implementing best practices when engaging in mental health communication. Social workers can help mitigate these concerns by increasing collaborative efforts across the sport industry (e.g., sport media companies, sport organizations) via education and practice initiatives to ensure more responsible and effective mental health messaging through sport. For example, sport social workers can hold forums with journalists, broadcasters, and other media personnel to provide education on best practices and

describe potential consequences of mishandling such conversations. Social workers within sport organizations can more actively engage with their communication staff in the development of public-facing mental health campaigns, press releases, and associated materials. Overall, this scoping review supports the need for more social work presence in sport communications.

Conclusion

The culture of sport has long contributed to the silencing of mental health; as a byproduct mental health stigma has been perpetuated within sport (e.g., Bauman, 2016; Gorczynski et al., 2020). Increasingly, mental health is being discussed via sport media, which may influence future mental health stigma and help-seeking behaviors. Based on the guiding principles of ASWIS, it is critical that sport social work scholars and practitioners ensure sport media discussions of mental health and associated research are responsible and follow best practices. In conclusion, we offer four calls to action for the field.

1. Sport social workers are charged to embrace interdisciplinary work. Practitioners should introduce themselves to colleagues, educate colleagues on their role, and initiate pathways to collaboration. Social work researchers should consider connecting with faculty in sport administration or communication departments to increase interdisciplinary research efforts.
2. There is early evidence to suggest that sport media can influence health behaviors and outcomes (Pilar et al., 2018). However, researchers should increasingly assess the efficacy of sport communications platforms as an intervention.
3. To ensure responsible mental health messaging is disseminated through sport media, social work practitioners should build relationships with sport communicators. Social workers can create educational and training materials, while also serving as a resource if a sport communicator has concerns.
4. Sport social workers and practitioners must use their extensive mental health expertise to ensure diagnoses beyond anxiety and depression are discussed within media and academic literature.

Ultimately, social work scholars and practitioners should not just view this article as a passive indicator of where the field is now, but rather as an active call to advance academic literature and practitioner work at the intersection of sport communication and mental health.

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Note. * Indicates a reference included in the scoping review

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