



# The Impact of social media on sports marketing strategies for student-athletes in JYU and JAMK

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The Impact of social media on sports marketing strategies for student-athletes in JYU and JAMK

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### **Abstract**

As social media's power continues to grow and is now a key factor in sports marketing, this thesis explores its impact on student-athletes, how they use it, what strategies they employ, and the challenges they face in their digital journey. The aim is to improve student-athletes' marketability and strengthen their social media presence, especially in today's world where social media's role is expanding rapidly. The objective of this thesis is to examine how student-athletes at JYU and JAMK use social media to support their marketing strategies.

This research used a qualitative approach, focusing on the experiences of student-athletes and their current marketing strategies. Interviews with five student-athletes from JYU and JAMK were conducted to gain insights into their social media usage, strategies, and habits.

The results of the interviews were positive, but they also revealed that there is a lot of room for improvement in social media use and related knowledge. Based on findings, recommendations were provided for how student-athletes can improve their social media presence and how institutions can help them. However, there is still a lot to be studied and understood in this field.

### **Keywords**

Sports marketing, social media, student-athletes, marketing strategies, marketing, social media platform, sports.

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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Background and context of study**

In this thesis, the phenomenon studied is the impact of social media on sports marketing strategies for student-athletes at the local universities in Jyväskylä, which are JAMK and JYU. The focus will be on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, X, and TikTok. Studies show social media's impact and rapid growth in sports marketing in recent years, allowing athletes at different levels to optimize their personal brands and engage with their audience on social media platforms. Social media makes it possible to relate to athletes, who are sometimes seen as perfect beings (Swarm,2018). Student-athletes at the collegiate level rarely have the same exposure as professional athletes on social media. The US is an exception, as collegiate sports are much bigger, resulting in a big social media following for athletes and clubs. For student-athletes at JYU and JAMK, where the audience and reach are smaller, social media has an important role in students' visibility, reach, and sponsorship opportunities.

## **1.2 Research Motivation**

Regarding student-athletes navigating the digital world and optimizing social media at JYU and JAMK, there is a lack of knowledge and research. Over recent years, sports marketing has been evolving continuously from traditional methods to social media platforms, making it a relevant subject to explore, especially how student-athletes are impacted by social media and the possibilities of using it. This topic is fascinating as it focuses on digital platforms' benefits to athletes. Also, it is a growing trend for student-athletes to promote themselves on social media. Therefore, it will focus on how students at JYU and JAMK can optimize their social media strategies to improve their visibility and marketability. The idea originated from being a student-athlete, having an interest in sports marketing, and using digital platforms to promote and enhance athletes' careers.

### **1.3 Research Objective and Questions**

The objective of this research is to explore how student-athletes at JYU and Jamk use social media to support their sports marketing strategies. The aim is to improve student-athletes' social media presence and marketability. Successful social media use can be measured by engagement metrics, brand visibility, and other insights, such as viewership and followers.

The main research question is:

RQ1: How do student-athletes at JYU and JAMK use social media to build their brand, content creation, audience engagement, and establish sponsorship opportunities as part of their sports marketing strategies?

Other research questions;

RQ2: What are the key social media platforms used by student-athletes at JYU and JAMK to promote their personal brands?

RQ3: How does the frequent use and type of social media content affect the digital presence and follower engagement of student-athletes?

### **1.4 Thesis Structure**

The thesis begins with an introduction that explains the background and research context. Then, it includes a literature review on social media's role in sports marketing and branding, and relevant existing literature about the thesis topic.

## **2 Literature review**

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework of this thesis. It will focus on five core areas: sports marketing, social media, branding, social sustainability, and differences between the US and Finland in collegiate sports. The theories supported by this thesis are based on literature reviews from articles, books, and other publications. This chapter's goal is to lay the groundwork for understanding the shifting dynamics of sports marketing in the digital era and its impact on student-athletes.

The literature review begins with a summary of sports marketing, highlighting traditional concepts like the marketing mix and alignment-based strategies, which are essential for generating value in the sports industry. It then explores the transition from traditional marketing methods to modern digital tools and strategies shaped by the rise of social media and the Internet.

The following chapter explores how social media is changing and developing marketing methods. The chapter presents theoretical insights into the impact of social media communication, audience engagement, and its ability to enhance athlete visibility and sports organizations. The analysis includes the features of social media marketing compared to traditional methods and explores the opportunities and challenges student-athletes face when leveraging these platforms

The last chapters focus on branding and the importance of personal branding for athletes. It highlights key aspects of brand development, brand awareness, image, and loyalty. It also examines how social media supports the growth of personal brands, allowing student-athletes to expand their reach and gain new opportunities. The last two chapters dive into how social media practices can support economic and social sustainability, especially in student career growth and opportunities, and the last chapter is about differences between the U.S. and Finland in collegiate sports marketing on social media.

## **2.1 Sports Marketing**

Shank and Lyberger (2021) describe marketing as a process that involves communication, creativity, delivery, and the exchange of information with customers, clients, and partners. Sports marketing shares many similarities with traditional marketing, but the main distinction lies in its connection to the sports industry. It includes promoting both non-sport products and sport-related entities such as teams, events, and athletes. Sports marketing stands out because of its wide range of engagement opportunities, its competitive environment, and its focus on entertainment and enjoyment for audiences. To succeed in sports marketing, it is important to have a strong understanding of both the sports industry and the basic principles of marketing within a sports setting. As previously mentioned in this thesis, the recent expansion of the sports industry has made marketing an increasingly vital part of the field.

Host and Moyen (2020) highlight the evolution of sports marketing within collegiate sports. Jim Host offered valuable insights and strategies to help student-athletes harness the power of social media. His contributions were crucial in growing collegiate sports, particularly by helping institutions generate significant revenue through media rights and sponsorship agreements. The host's work established the foundation of modern sports marketing by emphasizing deals that benefit both sports organizations and their partners. He also stressed the importance of media exposure, audience engagement, and aligning with appropriate brands—principles that continue to be critical for sports marketing on social media today.

The Internet and social media have played major roles in transforming sports marketing. The shift away from traditional marketing approaches was largely driven by the rise of social media, which changed how teams, athletes, and brands interact with fans. These platforms enable global engagement, allowing for deeper relationships with supporters and strengthening brand loyalty. By using social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, X, and Instagram, teams can enhance the fan experience beyond live events by sharing behind-the-scenes content, building online communities, and offering personal insights (Baena, 2016).



Figure 1. Marketing mix. The four Ps (Mihai, 2013).

The marketing mix is a strategy that consists of four key elements: product, price, place, and promotion; it's also known as the four Ps. After finding and selecting a target market, strategies are

developed for the elements, which all work together to make the strategy as successful as possible (Mihai, 2013).

In sports, commonly, the product is the game, the sport itself. For example, with football, the match is the main product, which the marketer has no control over; the marketer can promote and emphasize the experience with product extensions and other added benefits to enhance the consumer's experience to the fullest.

In marketing, the customer is the lifeline, and the mission is to fulfill their satisfaction. Look at what they are seeking and determine customer needs. Lastly, offer the customer a product or service with profit (Kosik, 2011). In marketing, psychology has a role in helping understand consumer behavior and motivations. Applying psychological principles can benefit marketers in reaching customers and building emotional connections.

Alignment-based strategies refer to when marketers endorse non-sports products and collaborate with sports organizations through sponsorships such as venue naming rights, traditional sponsorship, endorsements, and licensing rights. Brands use this strategy to enhance customers' perception of the brand's product. Brands look to promote their products at well-known events. For example, Rolex is the official partner of Formula One. The events in Formula One have tens of millions of viewers each race (Körkkö, 2022, P.13).

Visibility is vital for brands. Hence, being a shirt sponsor for a big club can be very beneficial. The English Premier League is one of the biggest and most well-known sports leagues worldwide, which results in sponsors wanting to be shown on their shirts and be visible to fans worldwide. (Körkkö, 2022). Arsenal Football Club has Emirates as its shirt sponsor and the naming right to the club stadium. They recently renewed their sponsorship in a deal worth 50 million pounds annually until 2028 (Sim, 2023).

This chapter supports the thesis objective of current sports marketing strategies (RQ1). By understanding key concepts of sports marketing, student-athletes can develop effective strategies for promoting themselves and connecting with audiences through digital and traditional platforms.

## 2.2 Social media

The term "social media" commonly refers to digital platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and others. Social media can be interpreted in different ways: some definitions focus on the technology behind it, emphasizing online networking and collaboration, while others highlight the ways users interact and build relationships through platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Car & Hayes, 2015). Often, when people are asked "What is social media?" they describe the platforms they personally use the most (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). There is no single, universally accepted definition of social media. Taprial and Kanwar (2012) suggest that social media simply refers to online platforms that allow people to connect and share news, photos, and other types of content. However, as technology evolves, new definitions continue to emerge, reflecting the ongoing changes in how social media is used.

Definitions of social media.

According to the **Merriam-Webster dictionary** online, **Social Media** is defined as *"forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)."*

According to **Wikinvest**, *"Social media describes websites that allow users to share content, media, etc. Common examples are the popular social networking sites like Friendster, Facebook, MySpace, etc. Social media also includes YouTube, Photobucket, Flickr, and other sites aimed at photo and video sharing. News aggregation and online reference sources, examples of which are Digg and Wikipedia, are also counted in the social media bucket. Microblogging sites such as twitter can also be included as social media."*

The **web dictionary** defines social media (noun) simply as, *"Websites and applications used for social networking."*

*"Social media are media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues."*  
*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\_media*

*"Interactive forms of media that allow users to interact with and publish to each other, generally by means of the Internet."* *en.wiktionary.org/wiki/social\_media*

*"Any website or web service that utilizes a 'social' or 'Web 2.0' philosophy. This includes blogs, social networks, social news, wikis, etc."* *webtrends.about.com/od/web20/a/web20-glossary\_2.htm*

Figure 2. (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012)

Social media has continued to grow steadily since its creation, and there are no signs of this growth slowing down. On the contrary, it is expanding as technological advancements improve. Faster internet, better software, and more advanced computers and mobile devices have all contributed to the rapid and ongoing development of social media (Dewing, 2010).

For athletes, digital platforms offer valuable opportunities to promote and strengthen their personal brand. One of the greatest advantages of social media is its ability to connect people across the globe, which has greatly supported the growth of teams, athletes, and sports organizations. Each platform offers different features; for instance, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are mainly used for public content sharing and public relations, while apps like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger are designed for private conversations between individuals or groups (Miller et al., 2016).

Research has shown that social media has a major impact on businesses, sports, and athletes. With the internet making endless information available at our fingertips, gaining knowledge has never been easier. Social media has not only influenced business and sports but has also helped shape modern culture, affected the economy, and changed the way people perceive the world (Amedie & Clara, 2015).

While social media has brought many benefits and transformed the way people communicate, it also has drawbacks. It can affect social skills, leading some people to prefer online communication over face-to-face interactions. Additionally, spending excessive time on digital platforms can be addictive and may lead to emotional and psychological challenges (Amedie & Clara, 2015).

### **2.2.1 Social Media Marketing**

Social media marketing (SMM) can be defined in several ways. Chen et al. (2011) describe SMM as a way to encourage conversations among consumers within online communities and through company-promoted content on major social media platforms. Meanwhile, Bajpai et al. (2012) define it as the process of attracting attention to websites or businesses through the use of social media platforms.

Social media marketing and traditional marketing share the same goal: increasing customer interest in a product or service. However, both methods differ; social media marketing leans towards social interactions and unlimited reach, while traditional marketing can connect consumers through atmosphere, trust, and physical products (Körkkö, 2022, p.20). Traditional marketing may not be as popular as before due to the rise of social media marketing, but it's still essential. According to Körkkö (2022), traditional marketing in sports marketing is still in use as sponsorship, television advertising, and banner advertisements resonate with fans. The older generation that is inactive on social media prefers traditional marketing methods.

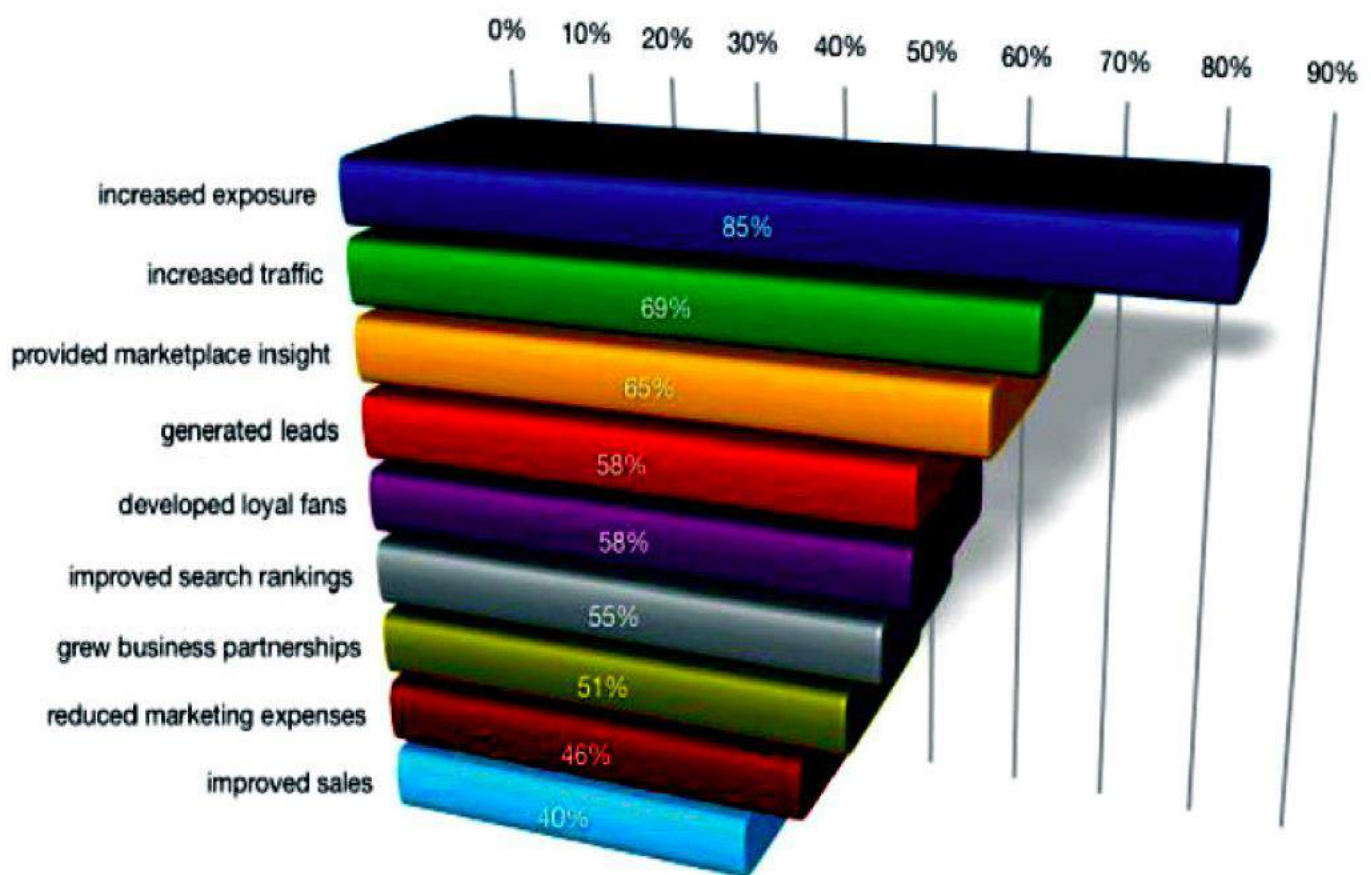


Figure 3. Benefits of social media marketing. (Karhimi & Naghibi, 2015).

According to Karhimi and Naghibi (2015), social media marketing is a clever, cheap marketing solution because of its low cost and benefits. Companies have said that their marketing effectiveness and product and brand awareness have increased after using social media. Marketers today are

very competent and have effective online communication tools, which help them gain the same influence as many large corporations.

### 2.2.2 Digital platforms

The social media platforms we will investigate in this thesis are Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook, and YouTube. These platforms are the most popular with student-athletes, making them the most relevant to this thesis.

According to Fuccia (2019), Facebook was the biggest online platform in 2019, with 2.77 billion users. 65% of Facebook users are under the age of 35. The source also stated that the average time spent on the platform is around 1 hour/day. Instagram is the biggest social media platform after Facebook, with over 1 billion users worldwide.

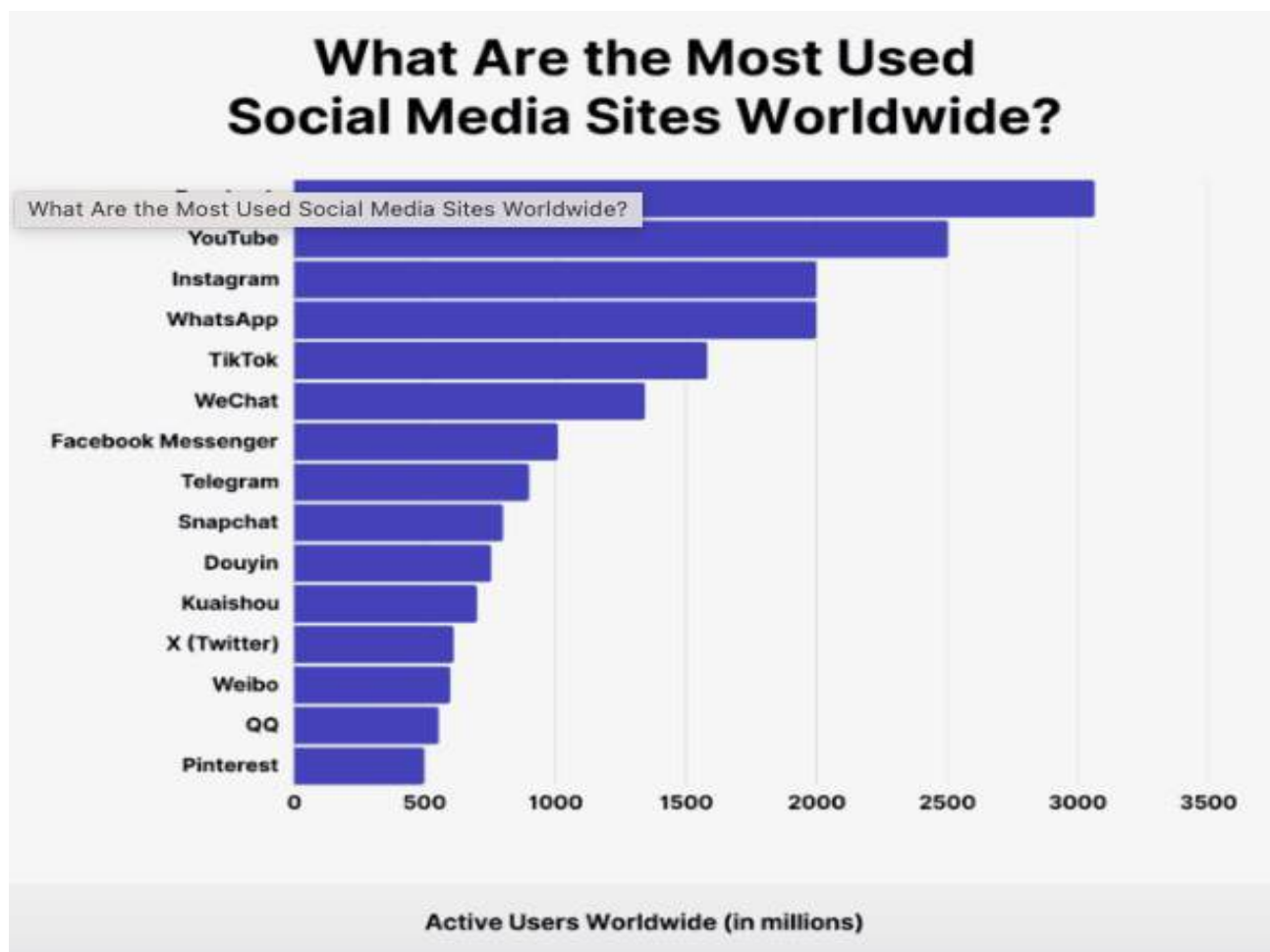


Figure 4. Most used social media platforms worldwide (Statista, 2024).

According to updated results, Facebook is still the most-used platform, followed by YouTube and Instagram. The number of users on these platforms demonstrates the unlimited possibilities student-athletes may have by utilizing social media platforms correctly.

The growth of social media opens opportunities. For instance, it can be used to gain insights into trends, influential people, and other information. The platforms used are a part of people's daily lives, especially the youth. Platforms like Facebook are excellent for marketers and businesses to promote their products through viral marketing, which can potentially be viewed by over a billion people. These different social media platforms can improve companies' PR, marketing, customer service, engagement, and other business-related activities, which are possible through social media. Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X have changed marketing. They have enabled consumers to create and exchange user-generated content (UGC), which connects with companies and other consumers by making relatable content as it's coming from other consumers instead of influencers, which makes the marketing message more relatable for the average consumer (Hruska & Maresova, 2020).

This chapter and subchapters support the thesis objective of investigating how student-athletes use social media (RQ2). The opportunities and challenges discussed provide a framework for assessing student-athletes strategies to establish their digital presence while managing potential risks.

## **2.3 Branding**

According to Malik et al. (2012), brand image can be understood in multiple ways, for instance, how consumers view the brand, "brand image is largely a subjective and perceptual phenomenon that is formed through consumer interpretation, whether reasoned or emotional." Brand image is important to customers as it expresses the significance of the brand. The differences between a

brand and a personal brand are minor. A brand has a lot of definitions, it's a relationship, personality, and perception of a company, while a personal brand differs because it represents a human being instead of a company (Bender, 2021).

In sports, branding has become a phenomenon used to promote athletes by demonstrating their personality and lifestyle and getting an inside view of an athlete's life on social media. Personal brands are essential for athletes as they can lead to sponsorships and endorsements. Other benefits could be gaining visibility, increased fan base, and revenue opportunities. In the 2000s, Manchester United Football Club player David Beckham was a global brand; he brought the club millions in profit because of his brand (Jankovic & Stojakovic, 2019). That showcases the possible impact of personal branding in sports. Media has an essential role in sports branding. To connect and build closer relationships between consumers of sports messages. Also, it is argued that sports make the best connections through advertisements and announcements of sports events (Jankovic & Stojkovic, 2019). It is evident that in sports events like the Olympic games, World Cup, and the Champions League, sponsors want to be involved with mega events like these. They are worth the millions paid as they give the brands global exposure.

From the perspective of the sports industry, establishing a brand may be a team or athlete, in this case, can impact how consumers act and make purchasing decisions, for instance, boosting attendance, merchandise sales, generating general interest, or encouraging participation in sports (Brunello, 2018). In the branding process, multiple key steps must occur for this to happen. The process is illustrated in Figure 2.

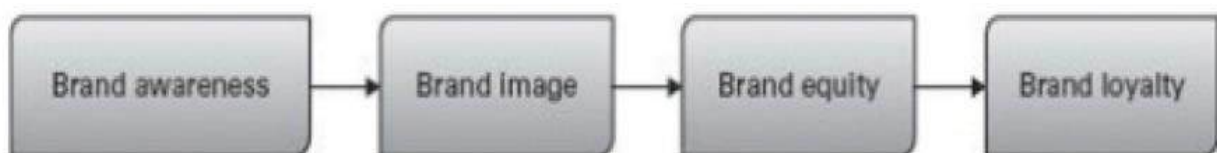


Figure 5. The branding process (Brunello, 2018).

Initially, it is vital to establish brand awareness. This suggests how well-known or aware consumers are of the brand. This also connects to the consumer's decision-making process; brand awareness impacts it. Known brands have a bigger chance of being considered by consumers when making choices. Although brand awareness is not considered the most important factor, it enables consumers to make quicker decisions. When the right level of awareness is achieved, marketers can focus on shaping the brand image. In conclusion, consumers must first know the product or service before understanding the brand's image. This represents what consumers think about a brand, affecting their attitudes. It's commonly seen as the identity of the brand. In sports, brand image is usually connected to athletes, teams, or leagues. For example, Mercedes-Benz is a sponsor and partners with tennis to convey qualities like power, control, and grace. Brand equity is the added value a brand generates for a product or service. It's the extra value that the brand name brings to a product. Brand equity is also the perceived team success, symbolic associations, awareness, and fan loyalty. Teams like Real Madrid, Barcelona, Manchester United, and Arsenal FC develop brand equity by strengthening their global reputation. The last step in the process is brand loyalty. This, in sports, is the ability to attract and retain fans. The ability to satisfy a customer increases the chances of returning or becoming a loyal fan. The most challenging part is maintaining loyalty due to the unpredictable nature of sports. The unpredictable nature is what makes sports one of a kind. However, successful teams strive to establish loyalty through positive experiences, connections, success, or their recognized image, which can foster long-term engagement and loyalty with fans regardless of team performance (Brunello, 2018).

Research shows that athletes with powerful brands bring value to teams or tournaments. In addition to the sponsorship and endorsement opportunities they create for themselves. By building a powerful brand, athletes can enjoy the benefits even after their careers by "lending their names to entrepreneurial endeavors" (Parmentier & Fischer 2012). However, Student-athletes are commonly not big power names as they are usually at the beginning of their careers, working on their brands can give them higher odds of being noticed outside of the game and increase numerous opportunities outside of the sport as within. According to Parmentier & Fischer (2012), a person's brand can be closely tied to their association with a specific sport, team, or event. For example, when football fans think of David Beckham or Cristiano Ronaldo, they often associate them with Manchester United, as that is where they are perhaps mostly recognized or where their brand began to grow exponentially.

According to Park et al. (2020), there is a lack of knowledge regarding the positive impact of social media use on student-athletes. Most of the research on Student-athletes concerns the issue of misusing social media. With the help of social media, Student-athletes can help their brand transition from school to work. The importance of managing your brand is essential. Retaining or creating a clean, professional profile, social media pages, and an online presence. Engaging with audiences and establishing an online identity. Leaving a good first impression on social media can be vital for student-athletes as it can portray personality and values to potential employers (Park et al., 2020).

The negative side of misusing social media can affect your social presence, which ultimately can result in sponsors not reaching out due to bad media behavior despite good performances on the court. Social media's impact on personal brands is huge. In some cases, athletes have had opportunities in Sports solely because of their personal brand and success outside of the field. This is not a common practice in sports, but it occurs as visibility brings opportunities that can result in more revenue. Personal brand development is important to student-athletes who want to excel in their social media presence, anything posted online can be found, regardless of how old. Making it important to be aware of what to say, write, and publish on social media (Bender, 2021).

As stated earlier, athletes with successful personal brands will likely have higher pay, more sponsorship, and endorsements. The impact those athletes have because of their "celebrity" status makes managing their brand more important. Sports clubs use athletes as tools for promotion, marketing, and management (Park et al., 2020). The value of athletes' brands is one of the reasons

agencies manage successful athletes' social media accounts.

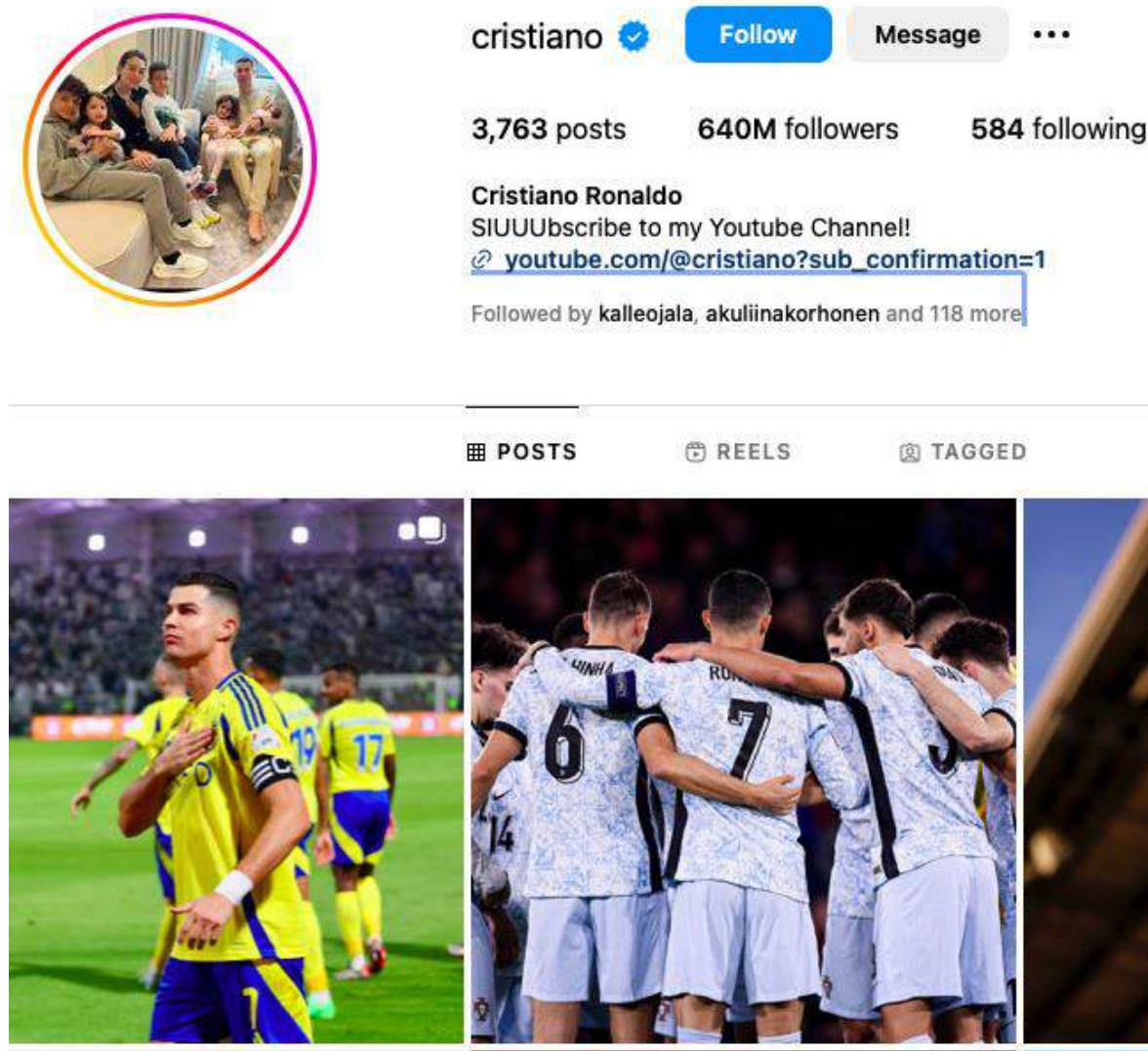


Figure 6. Cristiano Ronaldo's Instagram. (Instagram.com)

Cristiano Ronaldo is known as one of the greatest footballers in history. The iconic "CR7" is one of the most well-known brands; by posting regularly on his social media accounts, he keeps his brand in the public's mind (Kumar, 2021), making him the most followed athlete and person on Instagram. Ronaldo earned around 44 million dollars through endorsement deals in 2019 (Burel, 2020).

This chapter supports the thesis objective of identifying challenges and opportunities in personal branding (RQ3). By analyzing the process in branding and the relevance it has to athletes, this chapter emphasizes how student-athletes can integrate their personal branding strategies with their long-term goals.

## **2.4 How social media practices can support economic and social sustainability, especially in student career growth and opportunities**

Social media is increasingly seen as supporting economic and social sustainability in education. It plays an important role in helping students grow in their careers and access more opportunities. By integrating social media into everyday life, and especially in education, it has become more dynamic and aligned with today's workforce and society.

Social media platforms like LinkedIn provide networking opportunities that are important for career readiness and development. They help students connect with industry leaders and potential employers, helping them better understand the workplace environment and expectations. On top of that, the interactive features of social media boost student engagement and learning, which can be a valuable element to traditional education methods.

Social media platforms like Facebook and X are essential in promoting community engagement. They allow users worldwide to connect, collaborate, and discuss issues around sustainability initiatives. This type of engagement helps build a stronger understanding and commitment to sustainable methods, which is important for shaping responsible future leaders (Bennett, 2022). Social media improves educational experiences through its diverse perspectives and voices, which is important in promoting equitable learning opportunities. For instance, Instagram and YouTube strengthen diverse student experiences, encouraging the creation of a fairer learning environment for students.

Social media plays a big role in helping people keep learning and growing in their careers. For example, LinkedIn Learning gives students an easy way to pick up new skills that match the evolving industry, making them more attractive to employers and helping them stay relevant in their jobs. Additionally, social media is a great tool for students to promote themselves, build their personal brand, and open up new growth opportunities. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok provide tools that make it easier for student entrepreneurs to enter the market, encouraging innovation and supporting economic growth.

This chapter emphasizes how social media plays a key role in promoting economic and social sustainability, especially by helping students advance their careers and access new opportunities. In line with the thesis's goals, the research shows that social media is more than just a way to communicate online, it is also a powerful tool for professional development and active participation in communities.

## **2.5 Differences between the U.S. and Finland in collegiate sports marketing on social media**

Sports marketing on social media is different in U.S. and Finnish collegiate sports, mostly because of factors like cultural differences, regulations, and what schools are trying to achieve. These factors and tailoring your approach accordingly are essential to making marketing work in each place.

### **2.5.1 Cultural Emphasis on Collegiate Sports**

Collegiate sports are a big part of American culture, bringing communities together and creating pride. As a result, universities put a lot of work into marketing their athletic programs, using platforms such as Instagram, X, and TikTok to connect with fans, promote events, and build their brand (Watkins & Lee, 2016). Recently, trends like real-time fan interaction and athlete-created content have become popular.

In Finland, the focus is more on recreational sports and physical education than competitive collegiate athletics, although collegiate sports may grow in the near future. Finnish universities prioritize academics over sports, which results in a more straightforward approach to marketing their sports programs on social media. In Finland, the focus is more on grassroots sports over institutional competition, and this influences how much they invest in social media marketing.

### **2.5.2 Regulatory Environment and Athlete Compensation**

A pivotal change in U.S. collegiate sports was introducing Name, Image, and Likeness rights, which means student-athletes can earn money from their personal brands. Since the NCAA updated their rules in 2021, athletes like gymnast Livvy Dunne and other big influencers on social media have used their large social media followings to land big endorsement deals, showing how athletics, personal branding, and social media marketing work together (Gaines, 2024). This change has made individual athletes a key focus of marketing strategies (Li et al., 2021).

In Finland, it works differently; no system lets student-athletes profit from their sports participation. Without this opportunity, student-athletes in Finland have less motivation to build personal brands on social media, which creates a different approach to sports marketing compared to the U.S. Universities in Finland tend to highlight team success or university achievements instead of individual athletes' success.

### **2.5.3 Institutional Approaches to Social Media Marketing**

U.S. universities often have marketing teams that create advanced social media strategies to promote their athletic programs. They use interactive content, live streaming, and fan engagement campaigns to build stronger connections with fans (Pedersen, 2021). The commercial and competitive nature of collegiate sports in the U.S. pushes schools to improve constantly within digital marketing.

Finland has a more straightforward approach to sports marketing on social media. The posts, if any, are more informational, focusing on schedules, results, or general updates. In Finland, collegiate sports are not commercialized or broadcasted, and there is less focus on building emotional connections or growing a fan base through social media to generate sales more sales.

## **2.6 Conclusions**

This literature review examined the foundational theories and evolving trends in sports marketing, social media, and branding, showing how these elements align and impact the modern sports industry. Traditional sports marketing established in the marketing mix and alignment-based strategies emphasize the importance of customer satisfaction, Brand loyalty, and fan engagement have long been important, however, the rise of digital technology, particularly social media, has changed these dynamics. Athletes and sports organizations can connect directly with audiences worldwide, boosting their brand visibility significantly and building personal connections.

The literature review examined the benefits and challenges of branding, highlighting how personal branding emerges as a key focus, particularly for student-athletes, and the importance of building meaningful personal connections. By leveraging social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, Athletes have an opportunity to build an online presence that possibly can extend beyond their achievements in sports, which can lead to greater opportunities for sponsorships.

## **3 Research Approach and Implementation**

### **3.1 Philosophy and Reasoning**

The research has an inductive reasoning approach. It investigates social media usage and marketing strategies to find insights from the data collected. Induction refers to constructing knowledge through specific observations and experiences rather than testing an established theory (Saunders et al.,2019). Inductive research links often to qualitative studies, in which

observations and patterns lead to new theories or frameworks (Saunders et al., 2019). This thesis aims to understand and explore how student-athletes use social media as part of their sports marketing strategies; an inductive approach fits appropriately with the inquisitive nature of the research.

The thesis adopts an explorative research design suited to phenomena that have not been widely examined or fully understood (Creswell, 2018). The use of social media in sports marketing, especially among student-athletes, is a rapidly developing area that has seen limited academic attention in the past. This research approach offers the flexibility to investigate emerging trends, reveal challenges, and help uncover opportunities that previous studies may not have addressed. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how student-athletes utilize social media platforms to increase their visibility, attract sponsorships, and cultivate their personal brands.

The methodology chosen for the research implementation in this thesis is the qualitative method. The method is suited for gaining deep insights into participants' experiences, motivations, and perceptions (Bryman, 2016). This differs from quantitative research, which focuses on statistical analysis and measurable outcomes; qualitative research focuses on capturing rich, contextual narratives and the subjective meanings shaped by participants' perspectives. By taking the thesis's aim to explore strategies, challenges, and opportunities related to social media usage, qualitative interviews provide the most suitable method for collecting detailed and nuanced data.

## **3.2 Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews will be the primary method of data collection for this research. Semi-structured interviews are perfectly suited to exploratory studies, especially when the study aims to gather a detailed, in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, beliefs, and strategies. This approach enables flexibility since it allows the researcher to follow up on interesting insights and delve deeper into specific areas of interest that may arise during the interview (Silverman, 2016). Due to the complex and personal nature of social media use for sports marketing, semi-structured interviews will promote a more balanced approach that is both conversational and organized,

ensuring all relevant topics are addressed while providing all participants the chance to express their thoughts and feelings in their own way.

Interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, supported by the need to explore student-athletes' subjective experiences. Social media strategies can differ depending on individual goals, sports disciplines, and levels of engagement on social media; interviews provide the most accurate option to comprehend these differences in depth. In addition, qualitative interviews are advantageous in understanding the motivation behind certain behaviors and challenges athletes face when using social media as a marketing tool. Through the interviews, the researcher will gain a deeper understanding of both professional and personal dimensions of social media use, which may not be possible through other quantitative methods.

To ensure the interviews were conducted in a way to align the data collection with the research objectives, the following steps were taken:

**Sampling method:** An approach was used to identify candidates who meet specific criteria relevant to this study, ensuring that the selected participants can provide meaningful insights into the research topic (Saunders et al., 2019).

**Participants' criteria:** The participants will be student-athletes who actively use social media platforms for sports marketing. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X to build their brands, engage, and attract sponsorship opportunities.

**Number of participants:** The aim is to interview five to seven student-athletes from JYU and JAMK.

**Interview format:** Interviews will take place on Zoom or Google Teams. Both options are online, providing flexibility for remote participants and convenience for recording.

**Interview guide:** Researchers often create a guide to help with the interview beforehand. The guide will help to prepare the semi-structured interview guide, which will focus on themes and issues the researcher finds important to the topic, in this case, topics such as:

- Strategies for building engagement and visibility.
- Challenges encountered in managing social media presence.
- Opportunities for collaboration, sponsorship, or personal branding.
- Social media usage habits and platform preferences.

Data management: The interviews will be recorded with the participants' permission to guarantee accurate data collection. The recordings will be fully transcribed word-for-word, as shown in the Appendix. All participants will be anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

In this paper, descriptive statistics and thematic content analysis were implemented to analyze the data collected from interviews with student-athletes. The methods used are commonly used and recognized for their ability to summarize qualitative data effectively while uncovering recurring themes and patterns (Vaismoradi et al. 2013; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Descriptive statistics were applied during the interview process to provide an overview of key trends. This involved factors such as the most frequently used social media platforms, common goals for social media use, and shared challenges student-athletes encounter. This method helped organize the data from the interviews into clear categories, providing a solid foundation for further analysis.

This study uses thematic content analysis to highlight and interpret repeated themes from the interview data. The approach focused on identifying patterns from the participants' answers and categorizing similar responses. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), it is emphasized that the importance of thematic analysis in qualitative research provides the opportunity for researchers to prioritize meaningful insights originating directly from the participants' perspectives.

The analysis started with an in-depth review of the interview transcripts to pinpoint key themes. For instance, recurring topics include social media strategies, opportunities for growth, support systems, and challenges and barriers. Thereafter, each theme was further explored to comprehend its relevance to the research objectives.

Key themes revealed from the analysis: Social media usage patterns: identifying how frequently and on which platforms athletes engage with their audience.

Sports marketing goals: Key objectives behind social media activity, such as sponsorships and personal branding.

Challenges and Barriers: Time restrictions, negative feedback, and lack of knowledge.

Support and Training: Resources and collaboration with professionals.

Future Opportunities: The long-term potential of social media for athletic careers.

These themes provided a structured way to interpret the data and align it with the research questions. The data analysis supports the research questions and objectives by providing a clear overview of how student-athletes utilize social media, from their experiences, strategies and challenges encountered. From the analysis, it was evident that social media has an enormous power for building personal brands and opportunities the lack of training, resources, and knowledge to exploit it limits student-athletes from reaching their potential. Overall, the analysis aligns with the thesis's objectives and also provides a solid foundation for exploring additional solutions and recommendations in the following chapters.

### **3.4 Research quality and ethics**

#### **3.4.1 Validity & Reliability**

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the thesis, careful measurements were taken to correctly represent participants' voices without changing the meaning of their answers. Direct quotes from the interviews supported the identified themes, ensuring clarity and transparency in presenting the findings. Careful attention was given throughout the thesis to ensure validity and reliability. Validity refers to how accurately the findings reflect the research questions and objectives, while reliability focuses more on the consistency and dependability of the research outcome (saunders et al., 2019). The study's validity was reinforced in this research by enhancing the re-

search design in well-established qualitative methodologies and frameworks. By using semi-structured interviews, it was possible to collect in-depth data that is relevant to the research objectives, ensuring that the findings were meaningful and well-grounded.

### **3.4.2 Ethics of the Study Principles and Process**

In this study, we guided ethical considerations by contemporary standards in qualitative research (Kiger & Varpio 2020). All participants were guaranteed privacy and autonomy. Before the interviews, they received information about the study's purpose, and their consent was obtained verbally to confirm their participation and understanding of their rights.

To maintain objectivity and ensure the reliability of the research findings, the data were analyzed without any pre-determined agenda, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the participants' responses. The data were securely stored on password-protected devices and will be deleted after the study is completed to protect confidentiality.

Being aware of potential personal biases from a social media and sports marketing background, reflexivity was applied throughout the process. Critical reflections on how personal views can influence the meaning of data were involved. Triangulation methods were used to minimize bias and enhance the study's credibility (Flick, 2021). These ethical and methodological practices maintain high research integrity standards, guaranteeing transparency, fairness, and respect for all participants throughout the research process.

## **4 Results**

Five interviews were held with student-athletes from both JYU and JAMK. The sports played by the different participants were football, futsal, and ice hockey. The answers were analyzed qualitatively, revealing important findings in their use of social media, the challenges faced, strategies used, and opportunities available. The findings highlight the differences in the way student-athletes take advantage of social media to improve their personal brand, grow and connect with audiences, and pursue their goals. This chapter organizes the findings into key themes, showing the shared experiences and individual strategies student-athletes use to navigate the land of digital sports marketing.

## **4.1 Social Media Platform Preferences**

The data collected from the interviews show that student-athletes at JYU and JAMK prefer using specific social media platforms.

Instagram was the most preferred platform alongside TikTok. One hundred percent of the participants used Instagram, which is the most popular because of its visual appeal and wide reach, attracting both athletes and students to post images and videos of their training sessions, rest days, holidays, competitions, and personal activities.

About eighty percent of the participants used TikTok, making it the second most used after Instagram. Its popularity is due to its dynamic content and popularity with the younger demographic. Athletes often post short, engaging videos on TikTok, which can go viral, increasing visibility.

Other platforms such as X (previously Twitter) and Facebook are used less frequently, mostly for more formal posts, and updates or to reach a different audience demographic that might not be as active on other platforms like Instagram or TikTok.

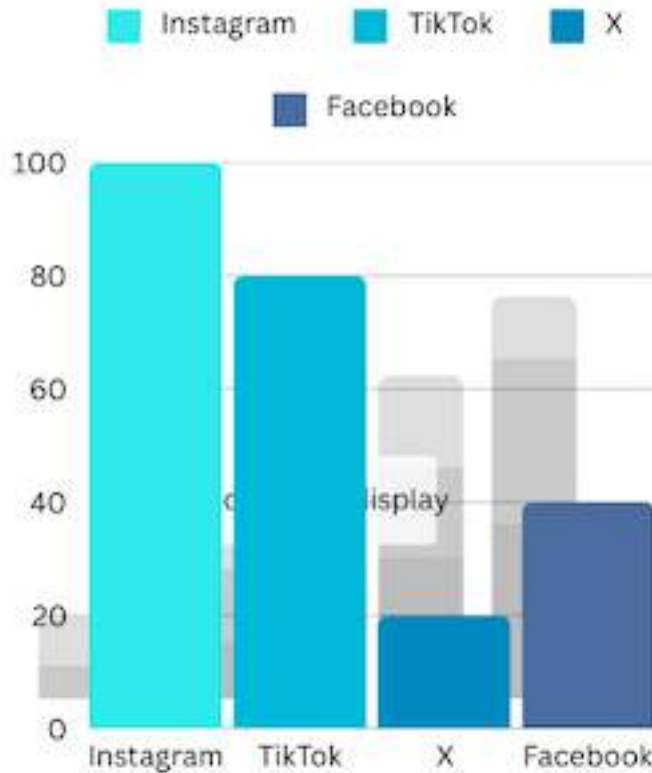


Table 1. The usage of social media platforms.

The Bar chart shows that every respondent uses Instagram, while X and Facebook are not as popular anymore. “Instagram is the platform I use the most because it is visually satisfying and addictive, and I like sharing photos and videos there,” - Participant X.

## 4.2 Content Types and Engagement Strategies

The athlete’s social media accounts offer a wide range of different content, often chosen to improve engagement and personal branding. Training sessions and gameday represent the biggest part (approximately fifty percent) of the content shared, the posts purpose is to motivate followers and show the athlete’s journey and progress.

Besides training sessions and game day events, an important part of the athletes’ content includes what happens outside of sports, including showcasing their lives outside of sports, traveling to

events, and personal reflections. This helps humanize them and build a connection with their audience and supporters. Promotional and sponsored content are a good way for athletes to gain more experience and visibility by collaborating with brands, showcasing their products or services as part of sponsorship agreements. This is essential to athletes' social media, as many athletes make income or receive free products through the deals. The bigger the athletes' influence gets, the better the deals get.

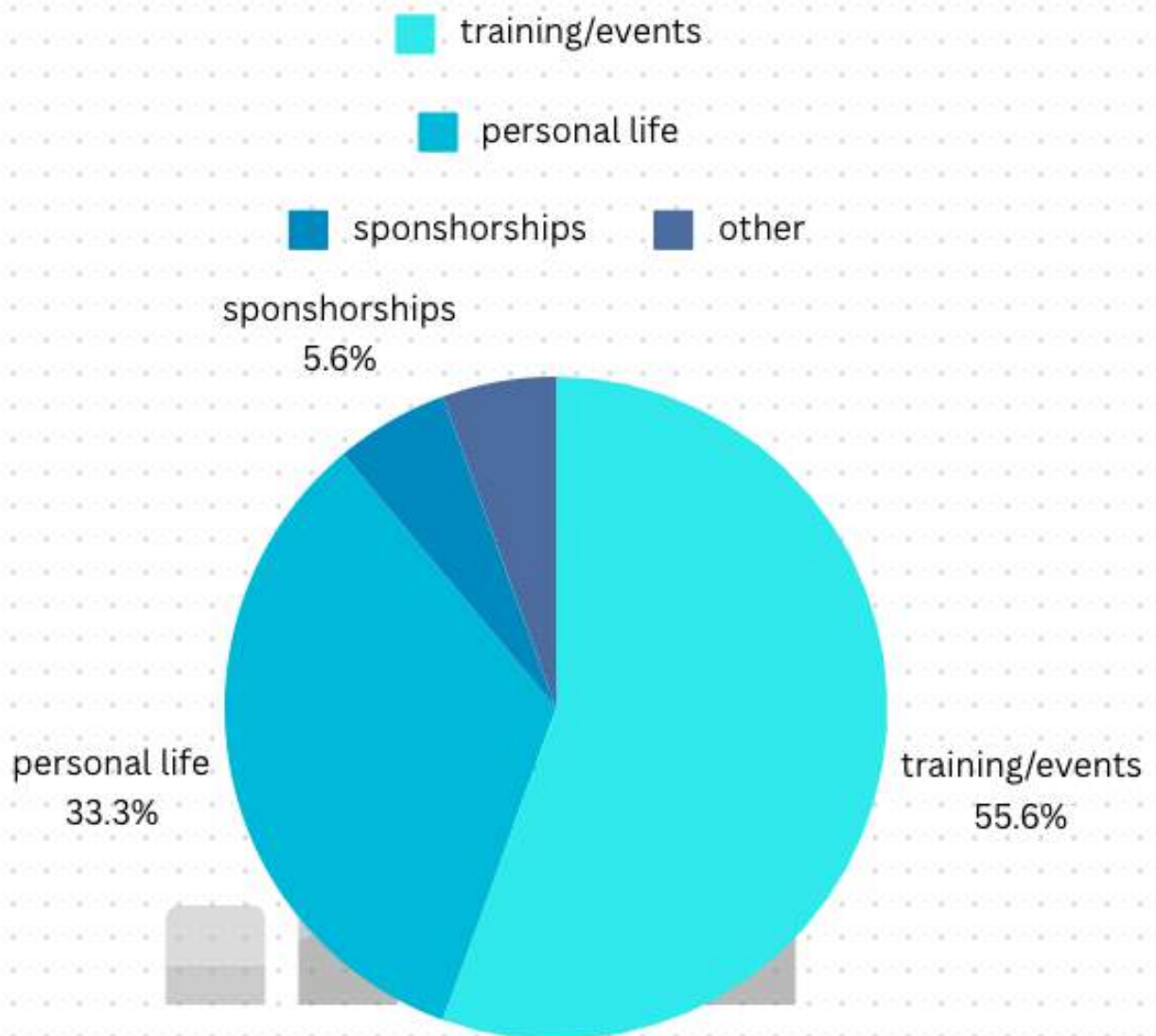


Table 2. Content type.

The pie chart shows the content that participants post on their social media accounts. One of the participants answered the question about the type of content they usually share on social media: “I mostly post training videos, sometimes match highlights, and motivational posts. I also share personal stuff, but I keep it mostly sports-focused”.

### **4.3 Posting Frequency and Consistency**

Student-athletes’ posting frequency varied greatly, depending on factors such as training schedules, overall mood, and energy levels. Close to forty percent of the participants posted daily on one or multiple platforms. Keeping a daily posting routine may help keep your audience engaged, and having an active presence and consistency over a long period is beneficial for platform growth.

The majority, approximately fifty percent, were weekly posters. Occasional posters are typically only posted during events or the off-season, and they may focus on quality over quantity. This may be a good method. However, consistent social media posting is essential for student-athletes who want to maximize their digital presence, visibility, and opportunities, which can lead to more sponsorships. This finding links directly with RQ3 by demonstrating that consistent and frequent posting affects your digital presence and follower engagement.

### **4.4 Challenges and Barriers to Social Media Usage**

Multiple challenges were expressed by the athletes in managing an effective social media presence. For instance, time management was one of the most significant challenges for many. Balancing the demands of being an active student-athlete and consistently posting on social media alongside studies and possibly a part-time job can be challenging.

Content creation skills are something that half of the participants find challenging alongside producing professional-quality content; in other words, they lack skills in areas such as video editing and graphic design. This is something that could be offered in universities to assist student-athletes in this area. By providing workshops that focus on helping students improve their editing

and content creation skills and manage online criticism and feedback, students can learn tools to improve their personal brand and handle the different challenges they will face throughout their digital journey.

Negative feedback or comments are something athletes express difficulties in dealing with. This can lead to not posting as consistently and impact athletes' mental health and performance.

#### **4.5 Support Systems and Resource Availability**

The support and resources available to student-athletes for managing their social media activity are minimal, which may impact their ability to build a strong digital presence. Only a few athletes receive advice and tips from teammates or fellow students who share their experiences. Only about twenty percent of respondents can access professional resources, such as social media managers or someone in a similar field, to improve their online presence.

Lack of support can result in unpolished content and missed opportunities to gain followers or sponsorship. Guidance can greatly impact an athlete's strategy for improving their personal brand. Having the opportunity for support and guidance is only beneficial for students and athletes striving to improve their digital presence. The findings align with RQ1 and RQ3 as they point out how support systems and strategic content impact their brand and sponsorship opportunities. The gap could be addressed through training or mentorship programs, which the universities could offer to help student-athletes use their social media more effectively and improve on weak points.

#### **4.6 Opportunities for Growth and Development**

Despite challenges across the way, athletes recognize substantial opportunities social media offers. For example, social media opens doors for brand partnerships and sponsorship opportunities for smaller, less-known athletes, which can significantly advance their careers both during and after their athletic careers.

Effective social media use enables athletes to build and maintain a fan base, which can be incredibly supportive during competitions and other professional ventures. This is why leveraging social media effectively is crucial for building a fan base and supportive community. However, these are only a part of the potential benefits that may follow. The larger and more engaged the fan base, the more attractive the athlete becomes to sponsors, coaches, and agents. Similar to the previous sub-chapter, academic institutions can help student-athletes improve their skills in areas that impact their social media strategies to help grow their brand and improve their content. Even with more support from Universities, student-athletes need to explore methods to improve and grow their social media accounts to maximize their growth. Consistently improving in areas related to social media reflects directly on RQ1 as it helps athletes be more marketable, henceforth strengthening their brand and opportunities.

#### **4.7 Personal Insights and Future Aspirations**

The student-athletes shared valuable insights about their personal social media journeys, pointing out challenges and opportunities related to building a digital presence. The participants expressed a steep learning process with social media, but also understood the immense benefits and rewards regarding visibility and engagement. Athletes expressed a desire to continue improving their social media skills to maximize future sponsorship opportunities and gain a bigger social media following.

One participant said, “Even if I don’t go professional, social media can open doors to coaching, fitness training, or brand partnerships.” This shows that social media is a strong alternative solution for aspiring student-athletes. Athletes usually set goals for their sports achievements, and doing the same for their social media strategies could be helpful. Setting goals can take someone one step closer to their achievements; this method is often used with athletes. Guidance from mentors can also help.

These findings are closely linked to RQ1 and RQ3. The athletes recognize the significance of using social media strategically to develop their personal brand and the effort necessary to achieve this.

## **4.8 Limitations of the Study and Future Directions**

The study has flaws. The small sample size and focus on JYU and JAMK mean the findings might not apply to everyone. Future studies could expand the sample size and include athletes from other universities or countries to gain a broader perspective.

Another issue is the reliance on self-reported data, which can be biased. Future research could combine interviews with quantitative data, such as social media analytics, to get a more complete picture of how athletes use social media.

Finally, the study only looked at the current social media practices of student-athletes. It did not explore deeply how these practices might impact their careers in the long run. The study offers limited but highly valuable findings into student-athletes' use of social media; there is still more to be explored. By building on these findings from the study, future research can help improve the role of social media in sports marketing and personal branding.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

The findings from the interviews help understand how student-athletes at JYU and JAMK manage the balance between student life and social media. Their experiences, how they use social media for their benefit, the challenges along their journey, and leveraging strategic opportunities. The key social media platforms used by students and how frequently they are used.

## 5 Conclusions

### 5.1 Answer to RQ1

RQ1: How do student-athletes at JYU and JAMK use social media to build their brand, content creation, audience engagement, and establish sponsorship opportunities as part of their sports marketing strategies?

Student-athletes at JYU and JAMK are active on social media. However, there is room for improvement in building their personal brands and connecting with their audience. Instagram and TikTok are the most popular platforms among students. They use these platforms to share a mix of content, including training videos, game-day highlights, and personal moments. It is not solely about showcasing their talents but also about allowing people to see the person behind the athlete. This makes them relatable and is a significant reason why many followers remain loyal.

Content creation is a huge deal for these athletes. They are posting training clips, game highlights, and even some behind-the-scenes content to give their followers a peek into their lives. The point of their content, and perhaps athletes' content, is not just about looking good on the field but about showing their dedication and the work they put into it. Student-athletes are also starting to collaborate with brands more. Common brands that many student-athletes are starting to collaborate with more are Myprotein and Icaniwill, for example, as they collaborate with micro-influencers. However, it is not easy. Many do not have the resources or know-how to make the most of these opportunities.

Audience engagement is a big part of establishing sponsorship opportunities. They could improve by answering more of the followers' messages through comments, DMs, and even live streams, as engagement enhances the chance of gaining more visibility and followers. It is all about building that connection and keeping people interested. The toughest part is staying consistent. Between classes, training, and everything else, most student-athletes struggle the most with consistency.

In short, student-athletes are using social media to build their brands, connect with their audience, and explore sponsorships. However, it's not all that smooth. Limited resources, a lack of knowledge, and time constraints are keeping many from making the most of it.

## **5.2 Answer to RQ2:**

**What are the key social media platforms used by student-athletes at JYU and JAMK to promote their personal brands?**

When it comes to platforms, Instagram and TikTok are the clear winners. Instagram is the favorite for most athletes because of its visual features and versatility, and it is perfect for sharing photos and videos. Whether it is a training session, a game highlight, or just a casual day in their life, Instagram lets them show it all. And with features like Stories and Reels, there is no shortage of ways to keep their audience engaged.

TikTok is another big one, especially for the younger crowd. The short, snappy videos are perfect for grabbing attention, and the algorithm does a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to getting their content out there. Even if they do not have a huge following, TikTok makes it easier for them to go viral and reach a wider audience.

Other platforms, like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, are used, but not as often. These platforms are used for more formal approaches or to reach a specific demographic that might not be as active on the other platforms. It depends on the demographic trying to be reached and what kind of content is shared.

Instagram and TikTok are the main players in this space. They give athletes the tools and reach they need to build their online presence and connect with their audience. By far the most used platforms used by student-athletes to promote their personal brands.

## **5.3 Answer to RQ3:**

**How does the frequency and type of social media content affect the digital presence and follower engagement of student-athletes?**

The study found that athletes who post regularly, whether it is daily or weekly, have better engagement and a stronger online presence. Consistency is key with social media. If you are not posting regularly, people can forget about you. Relevance is not forever on social media. It is not

just about how often you post; quality will always beat quantity. Athletes who share high-quality content with a mix of athletic and personal content tend to do better. Training videos and game highlights are great for student-athletes, but personal posts, like travel, lifestyle content, or vlogs, help humanize them. It is about showing that they are more than just athletes; they are real people with real lives. And when it comes to sponsored content, authenticity is key. If it feels forced, people can tell.

The best-sponsored content typically highlights products or services that the creator genuinely loves and employs. Producing high-quality content requires training, research, and staying updated with trends. While everyone can create content, a lack of strategy and training can significantly hinder their ability to grow an audience and secure sponsorships due to the quality of their content.

In the end, frequency and content type are important factors in building a strong digital presence and keeping followers engaged. However, this process is not without its challenges. Time management and content creation skills are also significant factors that help athletes improve their digital presence.

## **6 Discussion**

### **6.1 Assessment of Result and Process Quality**

The study did what it set out to do: it explored how student-athletes at JYU and JAMK use social media for sports marketing. The qualitative approach, especially the semi-structured interviews, gave us a deep dive into the athletes' experiences, strategies, and challenges. The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed some clear patterns and themes, and the direct quotes from participants helped keep things grounded and authentic.

Nevertheless, it is not perfect. The limited number of participants in this study, five, means the findings may not be the most accurate. Despite the constraints, the study offers valuable insights into student-athletes' use of social media strategies at JYU and JAMK and sets the tone for future research.

## **6.2 Theoretical Contributions**

The findings add to the existing literature on sports marketing and personal branding, especially regarding student-athletes. The study highlights how important social media is for personal branding and audience engagement, which aligns with what other researchers have found (Park et al., 2020; Bender, 2021). However, it also brings something new to the table by focusing on the challenges faced by student-athletes in Finland, a context that has not received much attention in the literature.

The study's findings also support the theoretical framework from Chapter 2, especially the ideas around brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty. The way athletes use social media to build their personal brands and connect with their audience fits right into the branding process described by Brunello (2018). However, the study also shows that many athletes lack the resources or knowledge to develop their brands fully, which points to a need for more research on the barriers to personal branding in collegiate sports.

## **6.3 Practical Contributions**

What does this mean for student-athletes, sports organizations, and universities? The findings highlight how beneficial the strategic use of social media is for athletes. Posting on a daily basis, creating a wide variety of content, from athletic to personal content, and authentic engagement are all key steps to building a strong personal brand and capturing sponsorship opportunities.

The findings suggest that sports organizations and universities need more support and resources. Courses or training programs on content creation, social media strategy, and brand management could possibly have a big impact on student-athletes at JYU and JAMK. Giving athletes tools and access to professionals like social media managers or graphic designers would help them take their online presence to the next level.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Interview Questions

How frequently do you use social media for sports-related activities?

Which social media platforms do you use most to promote yourself as an athlete? Why?

What type of content do you usually share on social media

Do you have a specific strategy or plan for how you use social media as an athlete?

What are your goals when using social media for sports marketing?

How do you measure the success of your social media activities?

What challenges do you face when using social media for self-promotion as an athlete?

Are there any barriers that limit your social media marketing efforts?"

Have you ever faced negative experiences or feedback on social media?

Have you received any training or guidance on how to use social media effectively for sports marketing?

What kind of support or tools do you think would help you improve your social media presence?

Do you collaborate with others to improve your social media strategy?

Do you see social media as a long-term tool for your athletic career?

What do you think are the most significant opportunities for student-athletes on social media today?

How do you think universities could better support student-athletes in developing their social media presence?

How has social media influenced your athletic career so far?

Is there anything you wish you had known about using social media for sports marketing?

What advice would you give to other student-athletes starting to build their social media presence?



