



Negative Social Media Commentary and Its Impact on Professional Sprint Athletes

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Introduction

In recent years, social media has become deeply embedded in the world of sports. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok allow for immediate and widespread commentary, enabling users to share opinions, criticisms, and expectations of athletes in real time. For professional sprint athletes, this constant exposure to social media creates an environment where public perception and athletic execution may intersect. Sprinting is a sport that depends on reaction time, precision, form, and focus. How well a sprint athlete does can be determined within a short period of time. Because of this, mental distractors such as social media can make a noticeable difference in athletic performance. Sprint athletes are frequently highlighted on social media, whether that be concerning their races or personal lives.

Social media commentary can take many forms, ranging from uplifting, supportive comments to criticism and backlash. The accessibility of commentary means that athletes often see and engage with it at any time. The increasing role of social media in sport also reflects a broader shift in how performance is experienced. How well an athlete does or doesn't is no longer confined to the moment of competition, but rather continues through online discussion on popular social media platforms. For some athletes, negativity coming from social media may serve as motivation, but for others, that is not always the case, as it may introduce additional pressure on the athlete. These differing possibilities make it difficult to interpret how social media affects athletes and their performance. Given this variability, it's important to explore how this constant exposure to social media commentary may relate to athletic performance. Although there have been studies on the general psychological effects of social media on athletes, there is limited research, if any, that connects negative commentary on popular social media platforms, specifically Instagram and TikTok, to measurable changes in athletic performance, especially among professional sprint athletes. So, to what extent does commentary from Instagram and TikTok on professional sprint athletes negatively impact their athletic performance?

Literature Review

Existing research on the psychological impacts of social media on athletes was examined within a broader context. A scholarly article published by Cynthia M. Frisby, a nationally recognized authority on media portrayals of minorities, athletes, women, and teens, discusses the media's influence on an athlete's performance, stating that "The athlete's perceptions of their anticipated performance may be affected by negative conditions like excessive media use and hype." If an athlete is constantly exposed to social media, it can change how confident or prepared they feel before they compete. That mental shift can affect how they actually perform. This idea is reinforced by Marieke Van Puymbroeck, a vice-provost and dean of the Graduate School at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, et al., who state that, "It was found that factors, such as media distraction, are psychological in nature, thus demonstrating the importance that mental factors play in elite sport performance." Together, these perspectives suggest that media exposure does not directly alter physical ability but instead impacts performance indirectly by influencing mindsets. As a result, disruptions to an athlete's mindset coming from social media may ultimately translate into changes in performance outcomes.

However, the extent of this impact on performance is not uniform across all athletes, as professional competitors are exposed to significantly higher levels of public attention and pressure. Josephine Perry, a chartered psychologist, states, "There is a need to 'perform' at all

times. No opportunity to switch off and relax as there is always someone watching, an Instagram post to do, or someone who might see you and post a photo.” This study suggests that professional athletes can’t escape attention and expectations set on them, as they are constantly discussed online. So, they experience a heightened level of pressure due to their constant visibility on social media platforms. Similarly, Caela Fenton, author of a Canadian running magazine and Secretary of State for Sport, says that “Social media is rife with harassment, abuse, and sexualization, but many athletes feel as though they can’t opt out of social media...” Even though social media can include a lot of negative or unwanted attention towards athletes, they feel as though they can’t escape it. Both of these papers highlight that athletes are not only evaluated during their competition, but also in their everyday lives, where their actions can be judged and shared online.

This issue has become more significant as social media continues to grow and play a larger role in athletes’ performance. Elyse Gorrell, a certified mental performance consultant, states, “Excessive or problematic social media use can negatively impact mental health and well-being, increasing risk of depression, low self-esteem, harassment, and burnout.” This quote establishes the relationship between negative social media and an athlete’s mental health. So if social media causes an athlete to doubt themselves or develop stress/ anxiety, it can ultimately hinder their performance because it causes an athlete to lose focus and doubt themselves. Furthermore, a research paper written by Sophia Bassi, a lead news editor for the Standard, argues, “After extensive media coverage about the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Simone Biles pulled out of the competition due to mental health issues, demonstrating the impact negative media pressure can have on an athlete’s performance.” Biles’ decision highlights how external pressure, especially from social media, can contribute to mental strain, reinforcing the idea that negativity coming from social media can directly impact an athlete’s mental health, which, as a consequence, affects their performance as well.

Beyond social media’s effects on mental health, it also influences an athlete’s self-perception and identity. Professional athletes, specifically, feel the need to perform well all the time. Walaa Jumah Alkasasbeh, head of the Program of Sports Management and Training, states that “Participants’ motivations in competitions differed from those in routine sports activities, while Ntoumanis et al. (2007) highlighted the role of enjoyment motivation as a predictor of continued participation.” This suggests that competition creates different motivations than normal sports participation. Enjoyment as a motivation is crucial for continued involvement; however, social media can shift an athlete’s focus away from enjoyment to constant public approval and expectations found on social media. Similarly, Jennifer J. Waldron et al. said, “Even with extrinsic rewards, athletes who feel like they are in control of their behaviors, will be more satisfied and more likely to continue participating.” This highlights the importance of how athletes perform their best when their motivation is personal and internal rather than outside pressure or expectation set on them. Social media weakens the internal motivations athletes have, like enjoyment, by making professional athletes feel constantly judged and expected to perform well. As a result, athletes may base their self-identity/ worth on public approval/ opinion, which increases pressure on them and can potentially affect their performance.

However, while these scholarly articles suggest that athletes can be affected by social media, there is minimal research done on the effects of negative commentary found on social media, specifically Instagram and TikTok, on professional sprint athletes. So this research aims to find out whether a correlation exists between negative commentary and athletic performance on the track.



Methodology

Introduction

This research study aims to compare how commentary from popular social media platforms has a measurable effect on professional Track and Field sprint athletes' performance. The method used for this study is both qualitative and quantitative. A mixed-method approach was selected to allow for both statistical measurement of performance changes in sprinting and a deeper exploration of athletes' personal experiences and perceptions on social media, specifically Instagram and TikTok. Throughout my research process, I attempted to remain unbiased. A couple of well-known professional sprint athletes were chosen for my study, which were Sha'carri Richardson and Noah Lyles. Commentary on these athletes' social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, was analysed in this study.

The quantitative component of this study analyzes sprint performances during periods of heightened social media controversy surrounding the athlete. The qualitative component examines interviews and/or press conferences of the athletes to identify statements and opinions made by the athletes on social media, and to what extent it is impacting their mental and physical health. By combining numerical performance trends with a thematic analysis of professional sprint athletes, this study aims to answer the research question to identify whether social media commentary directly correlates with sprint athletes' measurable performance changes and how athletes understand its influence on them.

Quantitative Procedure

1. Athlete selection

2 major professional sprint athletes were chosen, who were Sha'carri Richardson and Noah Lyles. A case study was to be performed for these two athletes. These were well-known athletes with a great amount of following on social media, especially after the Olympics that took place in Paris in 2024. The selected group of athletes has experienced viral social media attention at some point during their career that involved controversy and criticism. I decided to examine Sha'carri Richardson first and Noah Lyles second.

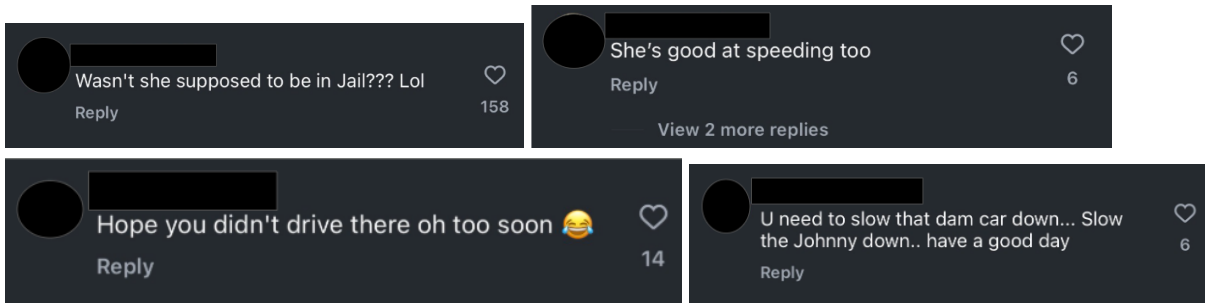
2. Identification of events that caused major controversy for the athlete.

Sha'Carri Richardson had been arrested in Orange County, Florida, on January 29th after she had been caught driving way over the speed limit (NBC News). This led to intense criticism towards her, and she faced major backlash for speeding, especially since she had begged the officer not to arrest her after she had been charged. So, commentary about her surrounding that time period on Instagram and TikTok was selected for analysis. Noah Lyles most notable spark of controversy was when he challenged the NBA's "world champion" title in 2023 (Los Angeles Times). Lyles's outspoken and loud personality had drawn a major amount of criticism towards him throughout most of his athletic career.

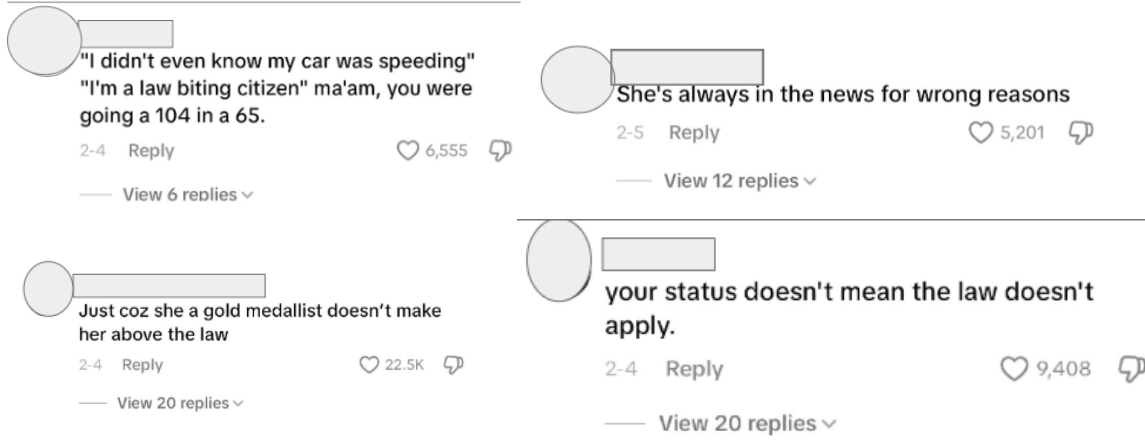
3. Social media data collection

Each athlete's Instagram page was opened, and their posts were looked at during the time of the controversy. For Richardson, Instagram commentary was analyzed during the time of her arrest. On TikTok, after searching "Sha'carri Richardson arrest", a few posts surrounding the event were shown. Looking through the comments of the most popular posts, a few comments were chosen. The comments' usernames and profiles are hidden for privacy reasons. Below are pictures of a few comments chosen:

Instagram comments:

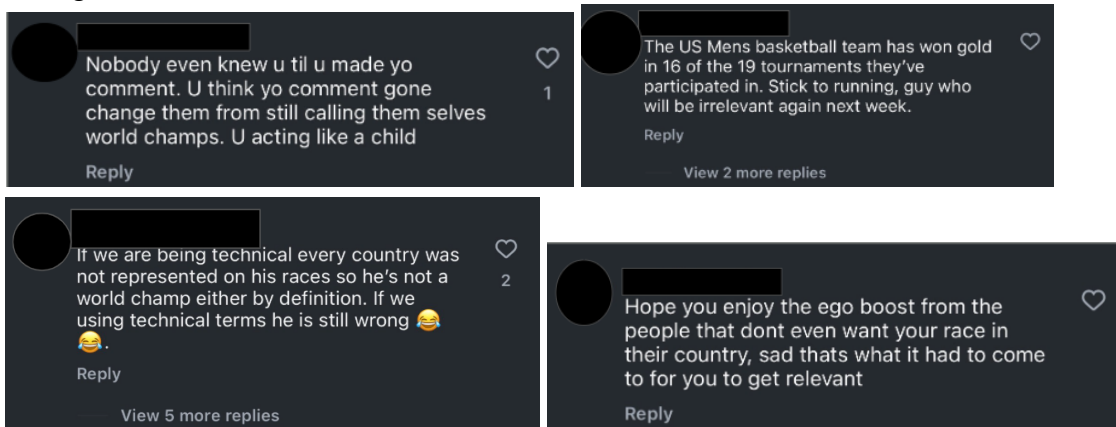


TikTok comments:

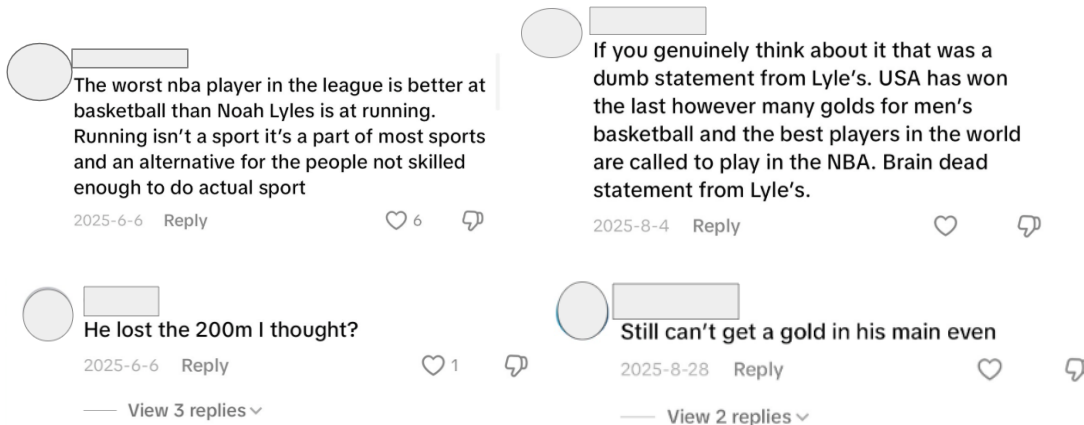


For Lyles, his statement made on the NBA was on August 25, 2023, so his post after the event on August 26, 2023, was chosen. From the comment section, there were a handful of comments that evidently perpetuated negativity on Lyles, so they were analysed. Below are the following comments that were chosen to be further analyzed:

Instagram comments:



TikTok Comments:



4. Performance times data collection

Meets during times of controversy were found, and times of the athletes' performances were looked at. After Sha'Carri Richardson's arrest on January 29th, 2026, the first meet she had participated in hadn't been until April 6th, 2026, which is a little over 2 months after the arrest. She participated in the Stawell Gift in Australia, where she competed in a 120-meter handicap race on grass (ESPN). She ran a 13.15 seconds, and won the race. Additionally, she is the third woman to win the race from scratch. Noah Lyles' first meet he participated in after making the controversial statement on the NBA was the 2023 Prefontaine Classic (Wanda Diamond League Final) on September 16, 2023, which is just about 3 weeks after the statement was made. In this meet, he competed in the 100m, where he clocked a 9.85s, coming in 2nd place right after Christian Coleman (ESPN).

Qualitative Procedure

5. Interview selection

Interviews that Sha'Carri Richardson and Noah Lyles spoke in that concerned social media and public opinion were watched. For Sha'Carri Richardson, a YouTube search was done, and the most-watched interview was selected. An NBC Sports interview in which Richardson spoke during the World Athletics Championships in 2023 was chosen. After watching the interview in its entirety, a few quotes concerning social media and public opinion were chosen to be analyzed. Below are the 3 quotes that were used for the analysis:

1. "I've seen the world be my friend. I've seen the world turn on me. But at the end of the day, I've always been with me."
2. "At the end of the day, I've always been with me. God has always been with me."
3. "It's always been my time, but now it's my time to actually do it for myself, and the people that felt like me, and the people that look like me, and the people that know the truth about themselves as well. I represent those people."

For Noah Lyles, a YouTube search was done, and the most-watched interview pertaining to social media was selected to be watched. Noah Lyles first interview after the since the Olympics was a podcast interview called the Toure Show, so it was chosen to be analyzed. After watching the interview in its entirety, a few quotes concerning social media and public opinion were chosen to be analyzed. Below are the 3 quotes that were used for the analysis:

1. "Why let somebody tell your story, when you can lead them to tell the story?"
2. "I just focus on what I know is true."
3. "They're going to have their opinions no matter what."

Analysis and Findings

I. Study Overview

This study aimed to investigate whether social media commentary has a measurable impact on the performance of professional track and field sprint athletes while also looking at how athletes interpret and internalize that commentary. By combining both quantitative performance data and qualitative analysis of interviews, the research sought to answer the following question, to what extent does commentary from Instagram and TikTok on professional sprint athletes negatively impact their athletic performance? I wanted to determine whether there was a correlation that exists between negative commentary on Instagram and TikTok and athletic performance on the track. I've conducted a case study on two well-known professional sprint athletes: Sha'Carri Richardson and Noah Lyles. The reason I chose these athletes is that both of them have been involved in some sort of controversy during the span of their athletic careers.

II. Findings

Quantitative Findings

For Sha'Carri Richardson, I found that she ran a 13.15s the first time running the 120m and ended up winning the entire meet. It was also the fastest time in history since 2006. Noah Lyles ran the 100m at the 2023 Prefontaine Classic, where he ran a time of 9.85s and ended up getting 2nd place. His personal best for the 100m was a 9.83s, and if he had run that time at the Prefontaine Classic, he would have tied for 1st place.

Qualitative Findings

After looking at the quotes pulled from the interview for Sha'Carri Richardson, I identified a theme that was common among those quotes: self-resilience. Similarly, for Noah Lyles, I did the same, where I identified a common theme among the quotes I pulled from his interview, which concerned social media and public opinion. Similar to Richardson Lyles' had a theme of self-confidence. After watching both Sha'Carri Richardson and Noah Lyles' interviews, I concluded that both athletes express their indifference to public opinion and, instead, focus on self-validation over public approval.

III. Interpretation of Results

Quantitative

For the quantitative part of my research, the inconsistency found between Sha'Carri Richardson and Noah Lyles can be due to the fact that these athletes competed in meets at different times after their period of controversy. Richardson participated in the Stawell Gift in Australia on April 6th, 2026, which is a little over 2 months after the arrest had happened. After looking at the positive outcomes for her at this track meet, it can be because she allowed herself a period of recovery during the span of the 2 months. The arrest was also not as relevant on social media as it would have been if she had participated in a meet just shortly after. Furthermore, Richardson's comment section in both Instagram and TikTok during the time of arrest was disabled, so no one was able to comment directly under her posts. This limits the amount of backlash and negativity Richardson receives; however, people did comment under older posts about her arrest, so those comments were used in my methods section. In contrast, Lyles competed in a meet only a little over 2 weeks after he passed his statement on the NBA, so his social media profiles were still flooded with negativity and backlash towards him. This meant that Lyles was constantly surrounded by a negative environment that could have

potentially affected his performance on the track. Before he made the statement on the NBA, on the same day, Lyles ran the 100m in 9.83s, and he not only won the 100m but also the 200m (Sports Illustrated). So, comparing his 100m time before (9.83s) and after (9.85s), there was a slight decline in performance that also cost him 1st place. If he had run his personal best time of 9.83s, he could have tied for first place with Christian Coleman. After the Prefontaine Classic, Lyles doesn't participate in a meet until a few months later, in which he competes in the 2024 World Indoor Championships. Results from the 2024 World Indoor Championships were not considered since that track meet took place several months after Lyles' controversy, so negative commentary wasn't relevant or found in any of his posts during March. These findings align with what was discussed in the literature review, where negativity from social media affects an athlete's mentality, which in turn affects an athlete's performance. Because commentary on Lyles' social media profiles was mostly negative, it may have impacted Lyles' self-confidence or even acted as a distractor, which, as a consequence, affected his performance because, as a sprint athlete, there is no time for mistakes as the winner can be determined within seconds. From start to finish, an athlete must remain focused on their race because there is no room for mistakes since only a few milliseconds can determine how well one did.

Qualitative

For the qualitative part of my research, I found that both Sha'carri Richardson and Noah Lyles don't let public opinion have any effect on them. This was concluded by watching an interview that each of the athletes participated in that concerned social media. As I watched, I pulled out a few key quotes that stood out to me the most that show to what extent each athlete let public opinion coming from social media impact their mentality. For the 3 quotes I pulled for Richardson, I found a common theme of self-validation, especially since for all 3 quotes, she talks about herself and how it is always up to her. Noah Lyles' quotes showed a similar theme as well because he also explains how it's only up to him at the end of the day. Both of them do talk about how they let the public think whatever they want about Richardson and Lyles, but they pay no attention to that. In the literature review, I discuss how an athlete's performance starts to decline once mentality starts to shift, and that sports are not only physical but also mental. So when these athletes claimed that public opinion coming from social media does not influence them whatsoever, it can be expected that it doesn't affect their performance on the track either in any way, shape, or form.

The findings for the qualitative part of my research only partially align with the quantitative part because, while both athletes claim that social media does not affect them, it is only valid for Richardson. After all, even though she was constantly surrounded by negativity in the form of Instagram or TikTok commentary, there seemed to be no effect of it on her performance. However, for Lyles, there was a slight decline in performance while he claimed social media did not affect him. In short sprints like the 100m, even a millisecond off a personal best is considered a decline, especially since Lyles didn't even end up winning the race. This suggests that specific athletes are more vulnerable to the public's opinion than other athletes may be, so it varies from athlete to athlete.

IV. Limitations

While this study provides insight into how negative social media commentary may affect a sprint athlete's performance, there are a few limitations to consider. First, this study was done on a small sample size. While a case study allowed for a deeper analysis of Sha'Carri Richardson and Noah Lyles, it did, however, limit the sample size. So it can not be generalized to all professional sprint athletes. Second, negativity from social media isn't the only factor that

affects an athlete's performance; other external factors may cause an athlete to do poorly. Training conditions and/or injuries are examples of external factors that may cause a decline in an athlete's performance. Social media isn't the only factor that affects how an athlete performs. Finally, for the qualitative part, not knowing to what extent the statements the athletes made during interviews are true or not is a limitation. This is the case because while an athlete might claim that public opinion has no say over them, there is no way for me to check the degree to which that statement is true or not, other than going off of what they said. So, there is a possibility that negativity coming from social media might have an effect on the athlete while they are competing.

V. Summary of Key Findings

At the conclusion of this research process, I determined that the extent to which athletes are affected by negative social media commentary differs from athlete to athlete. Some athletes might be more susceptible to negative social media comments than others which results in performances that vary. While I can't establish that the research question, to what extent does commentary from Instagram and TikTok on professional sprint athletes negatively impact their athletic performance, was answered, I can conclude that social media and the negativity coming from it can affect athletes to some extent. Whether that is enough to affect their performance can't be determined from this research.

Conclusion

In this research paper, the goal was to determine how significantly comments coming from Instagram and TikTok about professional sprint athletes negatively affect their athletic performance. While a definite answer wasn't determined, it was concluded that negativity from social media affects athletic performance to some extent based on how vulnerable athletes are to public opinion. It was found that Sha'Carri Richardson, after taking an extended period of time off for recovery after her arrest, performed well at the Stawell Gift in Australia. For Noah Lyles, after competing in a race during a period of heightened negativity towards him, he didn't run a personal best and ended up getting 2nd place at the 2023 Prefontaine Classic. This research matters because it highlights the importance of social media's role in an athlete's performance. Athletes can potentially be affected by what is said about them on social media in the form of commentary, and it can go as far as affecting their performance.

For future research, this research can be done on not just sprint athletes but distance athletes or athletes who participate in field events as well. This allows for a wider range, and findings can be compared with each other to see if any patterns can be established. Also, research on how positive and uplifting commentary affects athletes can be done. This can be done for a comparison between how athletes perform while being surrounded by a positive environment versus a negative environment. Future studies can build off this research by conducting a case study on many more professional sprint athletes and seeing who is more susceptible to social media.

This research matters as it provides insight into how social media can impact athletes. Social media can affect an athlete's confidence, motivation, and overall performance, so it is important to understand these effects. Hopefully, social media users can be more mindful when commenting online, even if it isn't necessarily a negative comment but just an expectation, because that still can add pressure to an athlete, which can hinder their performance. Furthermore, negativity from social media can shape an athlete's self-perception and identity. When athletes feel pressured to constantly meet public expectations, they may begin to tie their self-worth to public approval. This can increase stress/ pressure, which can, as a consequence,



affect an athlete's performance. So, hopefully, next time someone decides to comment on something under an athlete's social media post, they will think twice before they post.



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