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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# A Digital Presence and Lived Experience: Athletes with Disabilities on Social Media

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**Abstract:** This study employed a phenomenological analysis using an interpretive approach to explore the lived experiences of athletes with disability' social media presence, focusing on meaning-making processes and subjective interpretations of their digital engagement. The research involved 15 participants and Data collection utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 45-60 minutes, conducted face-to-face or via video conferencing, with analysis following phenomenological principles that resulted in 287 semantic propositions being reduced to 96 semantic units, then 13 subordinate themes, and finally five principal themes include Identity Reconstruction in Digital Space, Confronting Discriminatory Structures, Social Relationship Dynamics, Psychological and Emotional Experiences, and Resistance and Action Strategies—demonstrating that social media serves as a complex terrain where athletes with disability simultaneously experience unprecedented opportunities for self-representation and community building while confronting persistent discrimination and developing sophisticated coping mechanisms, challenging simplistic narratives about technology as either purely liberating or oppressive for marginalized communities.

**Keywords ;** Digital identity; Social Media; Phenomenological analysis; Lived experience, Qualitative Study.

## Highlights

- Social media creates complex identity reconstruction opportunities for athletes with disability
- Athletes develop sophisticated strategies to resist online discrimination and stigma
- Digital platforms enable community building while exposing persistent barriers



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## Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed sports communication across multiple dimensions, creating unprecedented opportunities for athlete-audience interaction and content dissemination. Digital platforms have significantly expanded the scope of sports content distribution while deepening the global influence and interactivity of sports events and athletes' personal brands, fundamentally altering how sporting narratives are constructed, shared, and consumed (Ling & Zhao, 2024). This transformation represents a paradigm shift from traditional one-way communication models to dynamic, multi-directional engagement platforms where athletes can directly control their messaging, build personal brands, and cultivate intimate relationships with global audiences. Traditional media channels such as newspapers and television broadcasting, once the gatekeepers of sports information, can no longer satisfy modern fan expectations for real-time, interactive communication with players, coaches, and fellow supporters (Gia, 2021). The democratization of content creation has empowered individual athletes to bypass traditional media intermediaries, enabling them to craft authentic narratives, share behind-the-scenes content, and engage in unfiltered dialogue with their audiences. However, this digitalization has simultaneously created significant challenges for sports communication managers due to the multiplied number of media companies producing sports content and the emergence of self-produced media products by sports actors themselves, requiring new strategies for managing complex, multi-platform communication ecosystems (Burk & Fahrner, 2020).

Within this transformed digital landscape, athletes with disabilities occupy a particularly distinctive and complex position in social media engagement, characterized by unique motivational drivers, presentation strategies, and audience relationships that differ markedly from their able-bodied counterparts. Research reveals that Paralympic content consumption is primarily motivated by information seeking, inspiration, empowerment, and entertainment, with inspirational content consistently generating the highest engagement rates among diverse audience segments (Mamo & Haegele, 2024). These athletes strategically utilize social media platforms not merely for promotion but as sophisticated tools for self-presentation and identity construction, with female athletes with disability typically emphasizing competitive achievements and athletic prowess while males tend to focus more on personal relationships and life experiences, ultimately using these platforms for validation of their accomplishments and humanization of their athletic journeys (Öztürk, 2024). Professional agents and marketing professionals have increasingly recognized the unique marketability of elite athletes with disabilities, leveraging storytelling techniques and social media strategies as critical branding tools, particularly valuing athletes' personal life stories, overcoming adversity narratives, and authentic experiences as key dimensions of their brand development and commercial appeal (Hu et al., 2023).

However, this commercialization of disability narratives occurs within a digital landscape where athletes with disabilities continue to face significant psycho-social challenges that extend from their offline experiences into social media environments (Rees, Robinson & Shields, 2019). Research examining Paralympic athletes reveals the multifaceted nature of these challenges, with participants experiencing communicational barriers, family-related pressures, and financial constraints alongside complex

psychological issues including sport anxiety, concentration problems, depression, sleep disorders, ADHD, and PTSD, all of which inevitably influence how these athletes navigate and experience social media platforms (Mousavi et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, social media platforms theoretically offer important opportunities for communication, exchange, and activism for people with disabilities, potentially increasing employment and leisure opportunities for traditionally marginalized groups, though significant structural and cultural barriers persist that limit their full participation and authentic representation (Kent, 2016). The reality is that the offline inaccessible environment has been largely replicated in digital spaces, particularly within social networking sites, creating continued patterns of exclusion despite the medium's democratic potential and promise of universal accessibility (Ellis & Kent, 2016). Nevertheless, social media simultaneously presents unprecedented possibilities for challenging traditional representations and creating new narratives around disability sport, as demonstrated during major international competitions where digital platforms enable real-time audience engagement and potentially disrupt established media hierarchies (Suggs & Guthrie, 2017). The Rio 2016 Paralympic Games exemplified this transformative potential, where Twitter provided immediate engagement opportunities that challenged the traditional gatekeeping roles of professional sports broadcasters and journalists, enabling new modes of authentic interaction with Paralympic sport that bypassed conventional media filters and created direct athlete-audience connections (French & Clair, 2018).

Mañas-Viniegra et al. (2023) showed that athletes with physical disabilities attract more attention when displaying explicit disability traits, while Öztürk (2024) argues that presentation strategies are gendered, with females emphasizing competitive achievements and males highlighting personal relationships, both using platforms primarily for validation. These self-presentation choices occur within a commercialized context where Hu et al. (2023) demonstrated that professional agents leverage storytelling and social media as critical branding tools, particularly valuing athletes' personal narratives for marketability. However, this strategic positioning must contend with systemic barriers, as McNary and Cottingham (2019) showed that female athletes with disabilities receive limited media coverage outside Paralympic years, forcing reliance on self-promotion through social media. The digital replication of offline exclusion patterns emerges as a consistent theme across studies. Holland et al. (2023) argued that sports media companies maintain hegemonic practices by marginalizing athletes with disability, while Rees et al. (2019) demonstrated continued invisibility and problematic "supercrip" narratives in mainstream coverage. These representational challenges intersect with platform-specific dynamics, as Roberto et al. (2020) found differential engagement patterns across disability types and social networks. Despite these barriers, emerging research suggests potential for transformation, with French and Clair (2018) showing how Twitter during Rio 2016 challenged traditional media gatekeeping, while Lins et al (2019) emphasized the importance of collective rather than individual overcoming narratives, and Zhang (2020) revealed sophisticated disclosure strategies in virtual environments.

Despite this growing body of literature, a critical gap exists in understanding the authentic lived experiences of athletes with disabilities as they navigate social media platforms in their own voices and from their own perspectives. While existing research provides valuable insights into presentation strategies, marketing

approaches, and representational patterns, it predominantly examines these phenomena from external analytical perspectives rather than centering the athletes' own experiences, challenges, and meanings they attach to their social media presence. The current literature tends to focus on either commercial aspects of disability sport marketing or broad patterns of representation, but lacks deep, nuanced exploration of how athletes with disabilities themselves experience, interpret, and make sense of their social media engagement. Furthermore, much of the existing research examines specific platforms or demographic groups in isolation, missing the complex, intersectional experiences of athletes who navigate multiple platforms, identities, and audiences simultaneously. This research aims to develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of athletes with disabilities in social media environments in order to achieve better insights into how these athletes interact with digital platforms and the meanings they construct from their presence in these spaces, thereby providing a foundation for developing more equitable and supportive digital environments for athletes with disabilities.

### **Research Design**

This study employed phenomenological analysis, specifically an interpretive approach. The research sought to understand the essence of athletes with disabilities' lived experiences with social media presence, emphasizing meaning-making processes and subjective interpretations of their digital engagement. The phenomenological approach was particularly suited to this inquiry as it allowed for deep exploration of how athletes experienced and made sense of their social media interactions, moving beyond surface-level behaviors to understand the fundamental structures of their digital experiences.

**Population and Sampling.** The target population consisted of athletes with disabilities who participated in competitive sports at various levels and maintained an active presence on social media platforms. Inclusion criteria required participants to be current or former athletes with disabilities who had competed within the last eight years at regional, national, or international levels, actively engaged on at least one major social media platform such as Instagram, Twitter/X, or YouTube, and aged between 18-45 years. Participants must also have demonstrated willingness to engage in 45-60 minute in-depth interviews about their experiences. Exclusion criteria eliminated athletes with cognitive impairments that could have affected their ability to articulate experiences, those who had been inactive on social media for more than six months, and athletes who had been involved in major controversies or legal issues that could have overshadowed their authentic social media experiences. The sampling strategy employed purposive sampling with a maximum variation approach to ensure rich, diverse perspectives.

The final sample size included 15 participants representing diverse characteristics across disability types, sports categories, competition levels, and social media engagement patterns. Diversity criteria encompassed various disability types including spinal cord injuries and limb deficiencies, different sports categories and competition levels, a range of social media influence levels, and gender balance (see Table 1). Instagram emerged as the most frequently used social media platform among participants, with all participants maintaining active profiles on this platform, while engagement with Twitter/X and YouTube was very low among the sample.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N=15)

Characteristic	Category	n
Gender Distribution	Female	7
	Male	8
Age Distribution	18-25 years	4
	26-35 years	7
	36-45 years	4
Type of Disability	Spinal Cord Injury	9
	limb deficiency	6
Sport Categories	Individual Sports	11
	Team Sports	4
Competition Level	International	3
	National	5
	Regional	7
Social Media Activity Level	Macro Influencer (>60K followers)	3
	Moderate Influencer (20K-60K followers)	4
	Micro Influencer (<20K followers)	8

**Data Collection and Sample Interview Questions.** Data collection utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 45-60 minutes per participant, conducted face-to-face when possible or via video conferencing with audio recording. The interview schedule followed phenomenological principles with open-ended questions exploring lived experiences rather than opinions.

Sample questions included: "Can you tell me about your journey as an athlete with a disability?" "Describe a typical day of your social media activity - what was that like?" "Tell me about a time when you posted something meaningful. What was that experience like for you?" "How did you experience representing yourself on social media?" "What had been challenging about social media as an athlete with a disability?" "Describe moments when social media felt empowering to you." Each interview began with rapport-building, employed probing techniques like "What was that like for you?" and concluded with participant debriefing.

The pre-interview phase lasted 10-15 minutes and focused on building rapport while explaining the phenomenological approach. Participants were encouraged to describe experiences in detail rather than provide explanations, with emphasis on their unique perspectives and lived experiences. The researcher clarified that there were no correct answers and expressed genuine interest in understanding their individual experiences.

During interviews, the researchers employed specific phenomenological techniques including descriptive probing with questions like "Can you tell me more about that experience?" and "Help me understand what that felt like." When participants provided general statements, the researcher requested specific examples: "Can you think of a particular moment when that happened?" The researcher practiced empathetic listening

while maintaining phenomenological curiosity, encouraging participants to slow down and elaborate on significant experiences.

Clarification and reflection techniques were used throughout, with the researcher offering statements like "It sounds like you experienced..." and "Let me ensure that I understand - you felt..." to verify accurate comprehension of participant descriptions. When participants used metaphorical or abstract language, these were explored further through questions like "You mentioned it felt like... can you help me understand that experience more fully?"

**Data Analysis Plan.** The IPA analysis followed a systematic process starting with reading and re-reading transcripts to achieve deep immersion in the data. Initial noting involved descriptive comments about content, linguistic comments about language use, and conceptual comments about deeper meanings and interpretations. Emergent themes were developed by transforming detailed notes into concise phrases capturing essential meanings. The researcher then searched for connections among themes, grouping and organizing them into coherent clusters before moving to subsequent cases. Cross-case analysis identified superordinate themes capturing shared aspects of the experience.

**Ethical Considerations.** comprehensive written consent covering study purpose and procedures, voluntary participation and withdrawal rights, confidentiality measures, data storage and destruction timelines, publication plans, and researcher contact information. Privacy protection involved using pseudonyms, complete data de-identification, secure encrypted storage, limited access to research team members, and audio file deletion after five years.

Special considerations for athletes with disabilities included maintaining dignity and respect, acknowledging researcher-participant power dynamics, ensuring findings didn't misrepresent the disability sports community, and providing participants opportunities to review interpretations.

**Validity and Trustworthiness.** This study employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework with four criteria. Credibility was established through multiple strategies including prolonged engagement with participants, comprehensive member checking procedures, peer debriefing, and triangulation of interview data with field notes. Member checking was conducted through a two-stage process: initial verification occurred immediately following each interview where participants reviewed key points and clarified any misunderstandings, followed by a formal member checking phase where participants were provided with their individual interview transcripts and preliminary thematic interpretations relevant to their experiences. Participants were given two weeks to review materials and provide feedback, corrections, or additional insights, with 13 out of 15 participants providing confirmatory responses and minor clarifications that were incorporated into the final analysis.

Transferability was ensured through thick description of participant experiences and purposive sampling across diverse disability types and sports. Dependability required maintaining detailed audit trails of all research decisions, including coding processes, theme development, and reflexive journaling throughout the research process. Confirmability was supported through comprehensive documentation showing how themes emerged directly from participant data, systematic tracking of analytical decisions, and explicit acknowledgment of researcher positionality and potential bias influences on data interpretation and analysis.



## Findings

At the final stage of each interview, the conversation content was first transcribed and then compiled into coherent text. In the analysis process, meaningful statements were initially extracted from the interview texts, where efforts were made to express participants' main perspectives in the form of concise and conceptual sentences. In the first step, 287 semantic propositions were identified. Researchers then conducted an in-depth examination of these propositions to group similar concepts together, and after integrating overlapping items, 96 semantic units were formed. Subsequently, by aggregating these categories based on conceptual proximity, 13 subordinate themes emerged. Finally, these sub-themes were reduced to 5 principal themes that had the capability to cover all extracted concepts.

Table 2. sample of supporting semantic units, subordinate themes, and principal themes extracted from the analysis

sample of supporting semantic units	subordinate themes	principal themes
Experience of representing a body with disability in virtual space	Embodiment and Self-Representation	Identity Reconstruction in Digital Space
Feeling of control over one's digital image		
Encountering criticism about representation methods		
Experience of distance between real and digital self		
Feeling of freedom in choosing how to represent oneself		
Encountering social expectations about appearance		
Experience of disability invisibility in some content		
Feeling empowered through image control		
Encountering pressure to be "beautiful"		
Encountering misinterpretations of images		
Experience of choosing between concealment and disclosure	Athletic Identity and Disability	
Feeling proud of displaying achievements		
Experience of defining oneself as athlete first		
Encountering identity reduction to disability		
Experience of struggling to be recognized as an athlete		
Encountering expectation to represent entire disability community		
Feeling responsible for presenting positive image		
Encountering forced inspirational requests		
Feeling empowered in controlling personal narrative	Agency and Autonomy	
Experience of freedom of expression versus self-censorship		

Feeling control over others' reactions		
Experience of choosing level of personal disclosure		
Feeling independence in virtual space		
Experience of resisting external definitions		
Encountering pressure to compromise with expectations		
Experience of receiving direct offensive comments	Explicit and	
Experience of double gender discrimination (female athletes)	Hidden	
Experience of discrimination in access to online facilities	Discrimination	
Encountering professional prejudices		
Feeling deprived of equal opportunities		Confronting
Experience of discrimination in financial support		Discriminatory
Encountering the "inspirational athlete" stereotype	Stigmatization	Structures
Feeling objectified in media narratives	and Stereotyping	
Encountering expectations of "extraordinary courage"		
Experience of being reduced to "victim-hero" role		
Feeling pressure to display constant happiness		
Encountering the "overcoming disability" stereotype		
Feeling judged based on severity of disability		
Experience of inequality in media coverage	Power Systems	
Encountering lack of resources and support	and	
Encountering discriminatory platform policies	Marginalization	
Feeling voiceless in mainstream discourse		
Experience of being ignored in policy-making		
Encountering discriminatory institutional structures		
Feeling struggle against entrenched systems		
Experience of need for continuous proof of competence		
Experience of receiving unexpected support from strangers	Support and	
Experience of forming meaningful online friendships	Solidarity	
Feeling understood by people with similar experiences		Social
Experience of creating online support networks		Relationship
Feeling of belonging to the athletes with disability' community		Dynamics
Encountering genuine empathy from users		



Encountering inappropriate curiosity about disability	Interaction with General Public	Psychological and Emotional Experiences
Feeling influential on social perspectives		
Experience of patience in the face of ignorance		
Encountering prejudiced judgments		
Feeling tired from repeated explanations		
Encountering others' fear and concern	Interaction with Media and Institutions	
Experience of one-dimensional representation in public media		
Encountering lack of access to main platforms		
Experience of criticizing media policies		
Feeling the need to fight for proper representation		
Encountering excessive emphasis on disability	Coping with Emotional Tensions	
Encountering media silence about achievements		
Feeling anxiety before publishing sensitive content		
Feeling helpless against discrimination		
Experience of spiritual exhaustion from continuous struggle		
Encountering guilt for complaining	Personal Growth and Empowerment	
Experience of tension between hope and despair		
Encountering anger from systemic injustice		
Experience of depression after receiving negative comments		
Experience of gaining self-confidence through positive interaction		
Feeling pride from influencing others	Active Resistance	Resistance and Action Strategies
Encountering positive identity reinforcement		
Experience of acquiring new communication skills		
Feeling progress in self-acceptance		
Encountering motivation reinforcement to continue		
Experience of creating positive change in society	Active Resistance	Resistance and Action Strategies
Using humor to combat discrimination		
Participating in research and studies		
Using negative experiences as motivation		
Encouraging constructive dialogue about disability		
Publicly criticizing discriminatory policies		

Creating online support campaigns	
Actively rejecting stereotypes and stigmas	
Producing awareness-raising content about disability	
Using empowering hashtags	
Building online support groups	Creating Support Networks
Producing positive role models	
Creating joint educational content	
Forming pressure groups for change	
Sharing effective coping strategies	
Encouraging young athletes with disability	
Creating safe spaces for discussion and exchange	
Producing joint content with like-minded individuals	
Creating coalitions with other athletes	

**Identity Reconstruction in Digital Space.** The first principal theme that emerged from the lived experiences of athletes with disabilities reveals a complex process of Identity Reconstruction in Digital Space, where participants navigate the intricate intersection of their athletic identity, disability experience, and digital self-presentation. This theme encompasses three interconnected dimensions that illuminate the multifaceted nature of constructing and maintaining identity within social media environments.

The experience of representing a body with disability in virtual space emerged as a central concern for participants, revealing the profound complexity of digital embodiment. Athletes described the unique challenge of translating their physical reality into a digital format while navigating societal expectations and personal comfort levels. Many participants expressed a heightened sense of control over their digital image, recognizing social media as a space where they could curate their representation in ways that physical spaces might not always allow. P2 reflected: *"When I post a photo, I can choose the angle, the lighting, the story I want to tell. It's empowering because I'm not just the person people see rolling by in my wheelchair – I'm the athlete, the advocate, the person with dreams and achievements."*

However, this control came with significant challenges. Participants frequently encountered criticism about their representation methods and faced pressure to conform to conventional standards of beauty. P11: *"People expect you to either hide your disability completely or make it the center of everything. There's no middle ground where you can just be an athlete who happens to have a disability."*

The complex interplay between athletic identity and disability identity revealed itself through participants' desire to be recognized primarily as athletes while navigating expectations to represent the broader disability community. P6 described this tension: *"I train six hours a day, but the first comment is always about how 'inspiring' I am just for existing. I want people to see the athlete first, not the disability."*

The sense of responsibility to present a positive image created additional pressure for many participants, who felt obligated to be perpetually upbeat and motivational. P8 reflected: *"I can't have a bad day online. If I post about being frustrated with training or disappointed with a performance, people either think I'm ungrateful or that I'm reinforcing negative stereotypes about disability."*

The experience of resisting external definitions emerged as crucial for maintaining autonomy in digital spaces. Many participants developed strategies to push back against limiting narratives while remaining accessible to their audiences, often focusing on technical aspects of their sport or sharing behind-the-scenes training content. The tension between freedom of expression and self-censorship was particularly pronounced. P1 explained: *"I want to be real about my experiences, but I also know that everything I post becomes part of how people understand disability. It's exhausting to always be thinking about the bigger picture when you just want to share a moment."*

**Confronting Discriminatory Structures.** The second principal theme revealed the pervasive nature of discriminatory structures that athletes with disabilities encounter across digital platforms. This theme illuminates how systemic barriers and prejudicial attitudes manifest in online spaces, creating additional layers of challenge beyond the physical and social barriers these athletes face in offline contexts. Participants described confronting discrimination that ranged from overt hostility to subtle systemic exclusions, each contributing to a complex landscape of digital marginalization.

Participants consistently reported experiencing direct offensive comments that targeted both their athletic abilities and their disabilities. These encounters ranged from questioning their legitimacy as "real" athletes to crude remarks about their physical appearances or capabilities. P3: *"The comments section becomes a battlefield sometimes. People say things like 'that's not real running' or 'why don't you just focus on being grateful instead of competing.' It's like they can't accept that we're serious athletes."*

Female athletes with disabilities faced a compounded form of discrimination that intersected gender and disability bias. P5: *"As a woman with a disability, I get comments about my appearance, my femininity, and my disability all at once. Men tell me I'm 'inspirational but not attractive,' and women sometimes question whether I should be 'putting myself out there' like this. It's exhausting to fight on multiple fronts."*

Many participants expressed feeling deprived of equal opportunities in digital spaces, particularly regarding sponsorship visibility, algorithmic promotion, and platform features. Athletes described how their content received less engagement and reach compared to non-athletes with disability, creating disparities in professional opportunities and income generation through social media. The discrimination extended to access issues, with participants encountering platforms and features that were not fully accessible, creating barriers to full participation in digital athletic communities.

The expectation of "extraordinary courage" created additional pressure for participants, who found themselves positioned as inherently brave simply for participating in sport. Athletes described how this stereotype diminished their achievements by suggesting that their success was primarily about courage rather than skill, training, or talent. P10: *"People act like showing up to practice makes me some kind of superhero. But I'm not brave – I'm an athlete who loves my sport. My courage isn't in competing; it's in dealing with all these assumptions about what my life must be like."*

The systemic nature of discrimination became evident through participants' experiences with power systems and marginalization within digital platforms and broader media coverage. Athletes described significant inequality in media coverage, with their achievements receiving less attention and different framing compared to non-athletes with disability. P9: *"When I win a race, the story is about inspiration. When an able-bodied athlete wins, it's about technique, strategy, and athletic excellence. The coverage makes it seem like we're playing a completely different game."*

Discriminatory platform policies emerged as a subtle but significant barrier, with participants describing how platform algorithms, accessibility features, and content policies created systemic disadvantages. P6: *"The platform's algorithm doesn't seem to understand our content. Videos of adaptive equipment get flagged as medical content, training posts don't get the same reach, and sometimes our accounts get restricted for sharing information about our disabilities that the platform considers 'sensitive.'"*

**Social Relationship Dynamics.** The third principal theme explores the complex web of social relationships that athletes with disabilities navigate in digital spaces, revealing how online platforms both facilitate meaningful connections and create new challenges in interpersonal dynamics. This theme encompasses the multifaceted nature of digital social interaction, from the profound solidarity found within disability athletic communities to the exhausting labor of public education and media representation battles.

Participants consistently described finding deep meaning and connection within online communities of athletes with disability, experiencing a sense of belonging that was often difficult to achieve in physical spaces dominated by non-athletes with disability. P14: *"When I found other adaptive athletes online, it was like coming home. These are people who understand what it's like to have your technique questioned, to deal with equipment failures, to celebrate victories that others don't fully appreciate. We get each other in ways that go beyond just sport."*

The experience of creating online support networks extended beyond formal athletic communities to include informal mentorship relationships and peer support systems. Athletes described how digital platforms enabled them to connect across geographic and sport boundaries, creating relationships that transcended traditional community limitations. P12: *"I mentor young athletes through Instagram now. Kids from small towns who've never seen someone like them compete can reach out directly. It's powerful to see someone realize they're not alone and that their dreams are possible."*

The formation of meaningful online friendships emerged as an unexpected but significant benefit of digital platform engagement. Participants described developing genuine relationships with other athletes, supporters, and even critics who evolved into allies. P4: *"Some of my closest friendships now started as comments on my posts. People who initially just followed for inspiration became real friends who check in when I'm struggling, celebrate my victories, and challenge me to grow both as an athlete and as a person."*

However, these positive connections existed alongside more challenging dynamics with the general public. Many participants described feeling influential on social perspectives, recognizing their unique position to shape public understanding of disability and athletic capability. This influence came with significant responsibility and emotional labor. P13: *"I can see how my posts change people's minds. Someone will comment that they never thought about adaptive sport before, or they'll share how seeing my training videos*

*made them reconsider their assumptions about disability. It's rewarding but also overwhelming to know that my existence online is constantly educating people."*

The experience of exercising patience in the face of ignorance became a daily reality for most participants. Athletes described developing strategies for responding to well-meaning but misinformed questions, distinguishing between genuine curiosity and willful ignorance, and managing their emotional responses to repeated misunderstandings. P3: *"How did you become disabled?" 'Are you in pain?' 'Can you drive?' I try to remember that most people are genuinely curious, but some days I just want to talk about technique without having to explain my entire medical history first."*

The excessive emphasis on disability in media representation frustrated participants who sought recognition for their athletic accomplishments, training innovations, and competitive achievements. Athletes described feeling trapped in narrative frameworks that prioritized emotional impact over sporting analysis, creating a cycle where their athletic expertise was consistently overshadowed by their disability status. P15: *"Sports media covers my competitors' training methods, race strategies, and technical improvements. But my coverage is always about inspiration and overcoming challenges. It's like they don't think I have anything valuable to say about actual racing."*

**Psychological and Emotional Experiences.** The fourth principal theme reveals the profound psychological and emotional landscape that athletes with disabilities navigate through their social media engagement, encompassing both the significant challenges and transformative growth opportunities that emerge from their digital presence. This theme illuminates how online participation becomes deeply intertwined with psychological well-being, creating complex emotional experiences that range from debilitating anxiety to profound empowerment.

The experience of anxiety before publishing sensitive content emerged as a pervasive challenge for participants, who described carefully weighing the potential consequences of sharing personal experiences, challenging societal perceptions, or addressing controversial topics related to disability and sport. P7: *"Before I post anything about my disability experience, I spend hours thinking about how it might be interpreted, who might attack me for it, and whether I'm ready to deal with the backlash. Sometimes I write posts and then delete them because the anxiety becomes too overwhelming."*

The spiritual exhaustion from continuous struggle became a defining feature of many participants' experiences, as they described feeling drained by the constant need to defend their legitimacy as athletes, educate others about disability, and maintain positive public personas while facing ongoing discrimination and misunderstanding. P10: *"There are days when I wake up and the thought of engaging with social media feels impossibly heavy. It's not just about posting a photo or sharing an update – it's about being ready to fight for basic respect and understanding all over again. The weight of that never goes away."*

Despite these significant challenges, participants also described profound experiences of personal growth and empowerment that emerged through their social media engagement. The experience of gaining self-confidence through positive interactions became a powerful counterbalance to negative experiences, with athletes describing how supportive comments, shares, and meaningful connections helped them develop stronger self-esteem and more resilient identities. P8: *"When young athletes reach out to say that seeing my*



*posts helped them believe in their own potential, it transforms how I see myself. I'm not just training for my own goals – I'm part of something bigger, and that gives me confidence I never had before."*

The feeling of pride from influencing others emerged as a significant source of empowerment, with participants recognizing their unique ability to shape public understanding and inspire other individuals with disabilities to pursue athletic goals. P11: *"Knowing that my posts have convinced parents to enroll their blind children in sports programs, or that I've helped someone understand that disability doesn't mean inability – that pride is indescribable. It makes all the negative stuff worth enduring."*

The experience of acquiring new communication skills emerged as an unexpected benefit of digital platform engagement, with athletes developing sophisticated abilities to articulate complex ideas about disability, sport, and identity to diverse audiences. P5: *"I never considered myself a good communicator, but managing my social media has taught me how to explain complicated concepts simply, how to respond to criticism constructively, and how to tell stories that connect with people. These skills have helped me in every area of my life."* These communication competencies often translated into professional opportunities beyond sport, including speaking engagements, writing opportunities, and consulting roles.

**Resistance and Action Strategies.** The fifth principal theme illuminates the sophisticated and multifaceted approaches that athletes with disabilities employ to challenge discriminatory structures and create positive change through their digital presence. Rather than merely enduring negative experiences, participants demonstrated remarkable agency in developing both individual and collective strategies that transform their online spaces from sites of marginalization into platforms for resistance, advocacy, and community building. The use of humor to combat discrimination emerged as one of the most creative and effective resistance strategies employed by participants. Athletes described developing sophisticated approaches to address ignorant comments and stereotypes through wit and irony, often disarming critics while educating audiences simultaneously. P9: *"When someone comments that I'm 'so inspiring for just getting out of bed,' I respond with something like 'Thanks! Tomorrow I'm planning to attempt the incredibly heroic act of brushing my teeth.' The humor shows how ridiculous their comment is without being mean about it."*

Participation in research and studies represented another form of active resistance, with many athletes recognizing their unique position to contribute to academic understanding of disability sport and digital representation. P12: *"I participate in every research study I can find about athletes with disability and social media. If academics are going to study us, I want to make sure our real voices are heard, not just what researchers think we experience."*

The production of joint content with like-minded individuals became a powerful strategy for amplifying messages and creating stronger advocacy voices. Athletes described collaborating across sports, disability types, and geographic locations to create content that reached broader audiences and demonstrated the diversity within the disability athletic community. P6: *"When I collaborate with other adaptive athletes, we can reach each other's audiences and show people that there's no single 'athlete with disability' experience. Our joint content gets much more engagement than our individual posts."*

The sharing of effective coping strategies became an informal but crucial form of mutual support, with athletes developing repositories of practical advice for managing the emotional challenges of public

visibility while maintaining competitive athletic careers. P3: *"We share everything – how to respond to trolls, techniques for managing anxiety before big posts, strategies for maintaining boundaries with media, ways to stay motivated when the negativity gets overwhelming. This shared knowledge makes all of us stronger and more resilient."*

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals the multifaceted nature of athletes with disability' experiences in social media, uncovering five interconnected themes that illuminate both the opportunities and challenges they face. The findings demonstrate that social media serves as a complex terrain where athletes with disability engage in identity reconstruction, confront discriminatory structures, navigate social relationship dynamics, experience intense psychological and emotional responses, and develop sophisticated resistance and action strategies. These experiences reflect a nuanced reality where digital platforms simultaneously offer unprecedented opportunities for self-representation and community building while perpetuating existing forms of discrimination and creating new challenges. The complexity of these experiences challenges simplistic narratives about technology as either purely liberating or oppressive for marginalized communities.

The findings reveal that athletes with disability actively engage in identity reconstruction within digital environments, demonstrating remarkable agency in choosing how to represent their embodied experiences online. Participants navigated the tension between authentic self-representation and societal expectations, making strategic decisions about disclosure levels while resisting external definitions imposed upon them. Their experiences of controlling their digital image, choosing between concealment and disclosure, and defining themselves as athletes first rather than disabled individuals highlight the empowering potential of digital spaces for identity work. However, this agency operates within constraints, as athletes encounter criticism about their representation methods and pressure to conform to normative standards of appearance and behavior. These findings strongly support Xu's (2023) finding that disabled individuals use social media to present themselves through video content, bridging the gap between disabled and able-bodied communities while navigating complex psychological feelings about online self-presentation. However, our findings partially contradict Gündüz's (2017) optimistic view that social media provides unlimited freedom for identity expression, as our participants faced significant constraints and backlash when challenging normative expectations.

Despite the democratizing potential of social media, the study reveals that discriminatory structures persist and often intensify in digital spaces. Athletes with disability encountered both explicit discrimination through direct offensive comments and subtle forms of marginalization through stereotyping and limited representation opportunities. Female athletes with disability faced the additional burden of intersectional discrimination, experiencing both ableism and sexism simultaneously. The findings demonstrate how digital platforms can reproduce existing power hierarchies through discriminatory policies, unequal access to resources, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes such as the "inspirational athlete" narrative or expectations of "extraordinary courage." These experiences reflect broader patterns of digital exclusion that extend beyond individual interactions to structural inequalities. Raffone (2025) explores how people with disabilities use social media to resist discriminatory attitudes. Heung (2024) identifies social media as



"breeding grounds for hate and harassment" where the disability community faces targeted discrimination, emphasizing that ableism has been largely overlooked compared to other forms of online discrimination. The research illuminates the dual nature of social relationships in digital spaces, where athletes with disability simultaneously build supportive communities while engaging in exhausting educational labor with the general public. Participants found belonging and solidarity within athlete with disability communities, creating meaningful support networks and friendships that transcended geographical boundaries, consistent with Bundon and Clarke's (2015) findings that para-sport participants use social media platforms to form strong networks that extend both online and offline. These connections prove particularly valuable as Silverman et al. (2017) demonstrated that friendships with others sharing similar disabilities buffer well-being from disability-related stressors, with participants reporting higher quality of life and social role satisfaction when having more friends with shared diagnoses. However, their interactions with the broader public revealed the emotional toll of constantly explaining their experiences, combating ignorance, and managing others' fear and discomfort. The findings highlight how athletes with disability become inadvertent educators and advocates, taking on the responsibility of representing entire communities while seeking recognition as individual athletes—a dynamic that Lindemann and Cherney (2014) explain occurs as athletes with disability gain legitimacy, visibility, and connectivity through social media while simultaneously negotiating representation of their entire communities. This reflects the broader phenomenon of marginalized groups bearing disproportionate responsibility for educating dominant groups about their experiences, revealing the complex burden that accompanies digital visibility and advocacy. The findings reveal the profound psychological and emotional dimensions of athletes with disability's social media engagement, characterized by both significant challenges and transformative growth. The research shows experiences of anxiety before publishing sensitive content, spiritual exhaustion from continuous struggle, and depression following negative comments, highlighting the emotional toll of maintaining visibility in digital spaces—experiences that align with Trevisan's (2020) observation that disabled individuals experience stress, anxiety, and isolation in social media contexts. However, these challenging experiences coexisted with powerful moments of personal growth and empowerment. Athletes reported gaining self-confidence through positive interactions, feeling pride from influencing others, and acquiring new communication skills through their online presence, reflecting Kim and Qian's (2019) findings that social media platforms facilitate relationship maintenance, initiation of new connections, and engagement in self-advocacy. The positive dimensions of engagement further correspond with Caton and Chapman's (2016) research showing that disabled users experience happiness, enjoyment, and development of communication and literacy skills through social media use, contributing to positive social identity formation and improved self-esteem. The tension between hope and despair emerged as a central emotional experience, with athletes navigating the psychological demands of advocacy while maintaining their competitive identity. This emotional complexity underscores how social media engagement for athletes with disability extends far beyond simple communication, becoming a site of both vulnerability and strength. Rather than passive victims of discrimination, findings reveal athletes with disability as active agents of resistance who develop sophisticated strategies to challenge ableist assumptions and create positive change,

aligning with Struck and Leonowicz's (2023) findings that disabled Instagram users effectively create self-representations that differ significantly from traditional media portrayals of disabled people as "victims" and "supercrips." They employed humor to combat discrimination, participated in research and advocacy, produced educational content about disability, and created online support campaigns to raise awareness—activities that Maulana (2020) recognize as ways social media platforms provide greater opportunities for people with disabilities to interact with non-disabled individuals, increase confidence and optimistic attitudes for public appearance, and prove their capabilities to the community. Beyond individual resistance, participants demonstrated collective action through producing joint content with like-minded individuals, creating safe spaces for discussion and exchange, and forming pressure groups for systemic change. Their commitment to encouraging young athletes with disability and sharing effective coping strategies illustrates how resistance becomes a form of community building and mentorship. These multifaceted strategies demonstrate not only individual resilience but also collective action aimed at transforming social attitudes and institutional practices, exemplifying what Ellis & Kent (2016) identify as the transformative potential of social media platforms as important media for communication, exchange, and activism that can increase employment and leisure opportunities for traditionally isolated groups.

The practical implications demand immediate attention across multiple sectors. Platform designers must urgently integrate accessibility and inclusion considerations into their foundational policies, algorithmic design, and content moderation systems rather than treating these as peripheral concerns. Sports organizations face a critical imperative to address documented representation gaps through proactive inclusion initiatives, authentic partnership with athlete with disability communities, and fundamental restructuring of promotional strategies that move beyond tokenistic gestures. Media professionals must abandon stereotypical portrayals that oscillate between victimization and superhuman narratives, instead developing nuanced representation practices that honor the full humanity and complexity of athletes with disability' experiences. Most critically, institutions must establish comprehensive support systems that explicitly acknowledge the substantial emotional labor involved in digital advocacy, providing concrete resources, mental health support, and compensation structures that recognize athletes with disability' educational and advocacy contributions as valuable professional work rather than expected charity.

While this study provides valuable insights into athletes with disability' social media experiences, several areas warrant further investigation. Longitudinal research could examine how these experiences evolve over time and across different career stages, while comparative studies might explore variations across different sports, disability types, or cultural contexts. Future studies could focus on specific populations. Additionally, studies focusing on the perspectives of audiences, media professionals, and platform designers could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the digital ecosystem surrounding athletes with disability.

### **Study Limitations**

This study's limitations include a small sample size of 15 participants that may limit generalizability across different disability types, sports contexts, and cultural backgrounds. Recruitment bias likely favored active social media users, potentially excluding less digitally engaged athletes or those who have withdrawn from online platforms. The cross-sectional design captured experiences at a single point in time, missing evolving

digital engagement patterns, while platform-specific variations and cultural/linguistic diversity were not fully explored. Additionally, researcher positionality may have influenced data interpretation, and reliance on self-reporting could introduce social desirability bias and exclude athletes with limited digital access or literacy.

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The authors declare no financial, professional, or personal competing interests that could have inappropriately influenced this research.

### **Informed Consent**

Comprehensive written consent was obtained from all participants covering study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, data storage timelines, and publication plans. Privacy protection involved pseudonyms, data de-identification, secure storage, and audio file deletion after five years. Special considerations for athletes with disability included maintaining dignity, acknowledging power dynamics, and providing opportunities to review interpretations.

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