

Athlete Mental Health and Its Influence on Endorsement Deals and Marketability

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Abstract

The interplay between mental health and the marketability of athletes forms a critical axis in modern sports dynamics. This paper examines the profound influence of mental well-being on athletes' performance, endorsements, and brand value. Factors such as social media scrutiny, pressure to maintain a personal brand, and mental health challenges—ranging from anxiety and depression to burnout—are analyzed alongside their implications for athletic performance and marketability. Through case studies of prominent athletes like Dele Alli, Giannis Antetokounmpo, and Simone Biles, the research highlights both the detrimental and transformative impacts of mental health on career trajectories. The paper also explores strategies for stakeholders, including brands and teams, to address mental health issues proactively, fostering resilience and authentic engagement. By prioritizing mental health, the sports industry can ensure sustainable success for athletes and elevate brand narratives in a socially conscious era.

Keywords: athlete mental health, endorsements, marketability, social media pressure, performance anxiety, resilience, sports branding, stakeholder strategies.

Introduction

Mental health issues are increasing due to social media. Now that every single second of your game is recorded and people can see everything, a single bad play can hinder your image as an athlete and the appreciation of good plays has just decreased. So you are like you're working so good and hard still not getting the rewards feels disheartening, but as you do one thing wrong your career is at stake. This constant pressure to be perfect causes a lot of mental health. A 2019 study found that about 35% of elite athletes have mental health concerns.

Common mental health issues among athletes:

- 1. Anxiety:** Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome. It can manifest as physical symptoms, like rapid heartbeat or sweating, and mental distress, such as constant worry and fear.
Reason: Anxiety often arises from stress, trauma, or life changes. It may stem from genetic predispositions, personality traits, or an overstimulated nervous system due to constant pressures from work, relationships, or finances.
- 2. Depression:** Depression is a mood disorder characterized **well-being** by persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, and low energy. It affects how one feels, thinks, and handles daily activities.
Reason: Depression may result from a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Traumatic events, prolonged stress, or chemical imbalances in the brain can

trigger or worsen depression.

- 3. Burnout:** Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress, often linked to work. It is marked by a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity. **Reason:** Burnout happens when one faces prolonged work-related stress without sufficient rest or support. It often affects people who take on high-stress roles, have high expectations of themselves, or work in demanding environments where they feel they cannot keep up.

Importance of Mental Health in Sports

Mental wellbeing has become a really important concept in life, it checks and checks the health of a person mentally, spiritually and sees if they are prosperous in life. Mental wellbeing is important as it helps prevent mental health issues and it also helps a person be balanced and be more ambitious and focus on his goals even better without any worry, which is good for an athlete as being focused on your goals to improve, being focused in game makes an athlete decide better and also be a great athlete making them be more liked by the world and also have better opportunities for salaries and endorsements because if you're the best at something people like you no matter what and you're on the front of that sport.

Historical perspective on mental health in athletics

- 1. Increased Pressure and Scrutiny:** Athletes face constant scrutiny from fans, media, and the public through social media platforms. Criticism, trolling, and high expectations from followers can lead to self-doubt, increased pressure to perform, and low self-esteem, especially after poor performances or losses.
- 2. Comparison and Unrealistic Standards:** Social media encourages comparison to peers and competitors, as athletes see curated images of others' successes. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, particularly when they compare their idealized versions of their rivals or even teammates, which may contribute to anxiety and depressive symptoms. Nowadays everyone can see the best of every day every day so the expectations for a good athlete have increased so keeping up with the pressure has also increased a lot.
- 3. Cyberbullying and Online Abuse:** Cyberbullying and hate messages have become common, especially after high-stakes events. These negative comments can deeply impact athletes' self-worth and mental well-being, leading to symptoms of depression or self-isolation.
- 4. Pressure to Maintain a Brand Image:** Many athletes are expected to build personal brands on social media, which creates additional stress to curate content that aligns with sponsors' or fans' expectations. The pressure to appear "perfect" online often leads athletes to suppress negative emotions, which can compound stress and anxiety.

Purpose and Objectives

Research Objectives

1. Investigate the relationship between mental health and athlete endorsements and marketability.
2. Examine how mental health influences marketability

How does mental health affect athlete endorsements?

Positive mental health boosts confidence and also brings positivity inside an athlete which helps them focus properly on their game and be confident while playing without any other external factor affecting

them. This confidence in players' interviews and also the way they play becomes an important role in the endorsement. (Jordan logo was a dunk he did in the game). (Ex-Anthony Edwards - Recently became a really big social media face due to his performance (due to his mentality) and his interviews where he says outlandish things with confidence which makes a likable demeanor.

Statistics and primary review - "He's probably the most interesting and exciting player in the NBA right now, and that's reflected in the data we see for his sneakers," **StockX merchandising director** for sneakers **Drew Haines** said. On the **StockX** site, Ant's salmony sneaks are currently selling for 22% more than their original retail price. **Adidas stock's 30% increase over the last six months**. According to **Complex**, Edwards has made "basketball sneakers feel cool again."

What are the implications of mental health on marketability?

Negative side - Explain mental health issues on performances and then Example-Drummond - He first spoke up about his mental health issues on social media saying he is quitting social media to focus on mental health and partnered with NBPA to spread message and awareness. 2012-2020 and 20-21 season till 22-23 season- Decrease in points from 14.5 to 8.8 blocks from creased 1.6 to 0.7, rebounds decreased from 13.8 to 9, and fewer shots (11.3 to 6.6). MOST IMP- minutes played from 30.8 to 18.4 min. Since he is a big man his blocks, points points and attempts matter the most so these have only been looked into. If we look his salary also had a significant hit due to his performance going from 25 million in 2019 to 9 million in 2020 and in 2023 he earned a measly 3.6 million.

Scope and Limitations

Consistent performance, focusing on the right things (not overthinking) to improve, strong personal brand/image, Fan engagement, Leadership role, and responsibility.

Limitations

1. Dependence on secondary data
2. Generalizability of case studies

Public perception of weakness, sponsorship concerns, unpredictability avail and ability, negative effect on performance.

Literature Review

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness. Anxiety in sports self-doubt to doubt about their performance, this may be underconfident, in their head of the opponent being too good, or not believing the hard work the athlete has put in and not understanding who are and underestimating is what causes under confidence, due to social media trolling, every play is seen and every time there is a camera on you and once something bad is done you can't change it, the pressure it causes is immense which makes you feel uneasy, pressure from fans to perform you had the best game of your life and now you have to keep it up, your the best player in the college now you're expected to be a great player from the start, this pressure causes fear and having high expectation also causes immense pressure.

How it happens? **Genetics**, Brain Chemistry- Imbalance of neurotransmitters: Anxiety can result from imbalances in neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which regulate behavior stress responses can cause anxiety, If a family member has anxiety the other family members prone to also have anxiety.

Catastrophe Theory: If the athlete is experiencing high levels of cognitive state anxiety as arousal rises towards the athlete's threshold, the athlete experiences a dramatic drop in performance. Theory releases also rely on the need for both arousal and cognitive anxiety to achieve optimal performance. This theory states that more arousal/anxiety causes a drop in performance. This is due to putting too much pressure on the athlete due to high arousal, for example, a cricketer tries hard to hit a 6 but if they try too hard they might stress themselves too much and this causes their performance to have an extreme decline.

Multidimensional Anxiety Theory: Cognitive Anxiety: Worry and negative thoughts that can hinder performance. The theory suggests that as cognitive anxiety increases, performance decreases.

Somatic Anxiety: Physical symptoms like increased heart rate or muscle tension. It proposes that moderate levels of somatic anxiety can enhance performance, but excessive somatic anxiety leads to performance decline.

Effects on the game: Low self-confidence levels lead to a decrease in confidence due to anxiety, self-confidence increases performance in some cases due to feeling the need to play their best under the spotlight.

Depression and mood disorders: A mood disorder is a mental health condition that primarily affects your emotional state. They can cause persistent and intense sadness, elation, and/or anger.

How does it happen? Chronic illness, childhood trauma, genetic factors, biological factors.

Cognitive-Behavioral Theory (CBT): This theory focuses on the connection between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. In athletes, negative thought patterns (cognitive distortions) can lead to mood disorders such as depression or anxiety, which in turn affect performance and well-being.

Mood States and Performance (Mental Health Model): This model links mood states (e.g., anxiety, depression, anger) to athletic performance. The theory posits that mood profiles can predict performance outcomes.

Stress and Burnout: Stress results from too much mental and physical pressure and too many demands on your time and energy. Burnout is a form of exhaustion caused by constantly feeling swamped. It happens when we experience too much emotional, physical, and mental fatigue for too long. In many cases, burnout is related to one's job.

High Expectations and Pressure: External Pressure: Athletes often face immense pressure from coaches, parents, fans, sponsors, and even teammates to perform well. This pressure can lead to stress, particularly when the athlete feels they must consistently meet or exceed expectations. Internal Pressure: Some athletes set extremely high personal standards (perfectionism), which can cause stress when they feel they aren't living up to their expectations.

Overtraining and Physical Exhaustion: Training Load: Excessive training without adequate rest and recovery can lead to physical fatigue. Overtraining syndrome (is characterized by prolonged physical and mental fatigue, reduced performance, and increased risk of injury, all of which contribute to burnout.

Injury: Persistent injuries or fear of reinjury can create ongoing stress. The physical toll of rehabilitation and the pressure to return to competition quickly can also contribute to burnout.

Imbalance Between Effort and Rewards: Effort-Reward Imbalance: When athletes perceive a mismatch between the effort they invest (training, sacrifices) and the rewards they receive (success, recognition, financial compensation), stress can arise. This can create feelings of frustration and demotivation, leading to burnout. Lack of Recognition: Even highly skilled athletes can feel undervalued if they are not recognized for their efforts, leading to emotional exhaustion.

Unresolved Personal Issues: Issues unrelated to sport, such as family problems, financial concerns, or relationship difficulties, can compound the stress athletes experience. When personal stress combines with athletic stress, the likelihood of burnout increases.

Causes and Contributing Factors

1. Performance pressure
2. Injuries and recovery
3. Social and media pressures

Social media has become a place of discussion and if you're a famous person each of your moves is tracked and is checked. This causes an unreal expectation of being always perfect and always the way you are on the field/court. Due to social media, there is a rise in high school and college basketball which puts a spotlight on kids at a young age which keeps a lot of performance pure also giving a kid that much attention can make the person confident which makes them not put in enough work as they already have reached fame. A lot of injuries also put high expectations to recover and come back better than before which causes a lot of pressure as they have to rehab faster, rehab, and also get back in form from the injury while matching the fast pace of the world and the social media/internet. This usually leads to hasty decisions and ruins a player's career or makes their performance drop.

The Relationship Between Mental Health and Sports Performance

There are a lot of Models that have been studied that show how a person thinks affects their effects there, cognitive behavioral and emotional thinking. These models involve a lot of key components:

1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** Seeing things in black-and-white terms (e.g., "If I'm not perfect, I'm a failure").
2. **Overgeneralization:** Making broad conclusions based on limited evidence (e.g., "I failed once, so I'll always fail").
3. **Catastrophizing:** Expecting the worst possible outcome (e.g., "If I make one mistake, everything will fall apart").
4. **Personalization:** Blaming oneself for external events beyond one's control.
5. **Cognitive Restructuring:** This is the process of identifying and challenging cognitive distortions or irrational thoughts. The aim is to replace these thoughts with more balanced, realistic, and adaptive thinking.
6. **Behavioral Activation:** In CBT, behavior is often targeted as a means to break negative cycles. For instance, engaging in enjoyable or meaningful activities (even when feeling down) can improve mood and motivation.
7. **Exposure:** Behavioural strategies in CBT often include exposure to feared or avoided situations in a controlled and gradual way. This helps individuals confront their fears and decrease avoidance behaviors that reinforce anxiety.

These key components can show the cause of performance anxiety and depression.

Performance Anxiety: Athletes may experience cognitive distortions (e.g., catastrophizing about losing or fearing failure) that increase anxiety and impair performance.

Mental Rehearsal and Self-Talk: Athletes are trained to engage in positive self-talk and mental imagery, which can help reframe negative thinking, boost confidence, and improve performance.

- One of the models that can show a person's exact reasons for mental health issues and the effect of that on his gameplay and marketability is the ABC model, This model helps explain how thoughts influence emotions and behaviors:
- **A (Activating Event):** A situation or event that triggers thoughts and emotions.
- **B (Beliefs):** The beliefs or thoughts an individual has about the activating event. These can be rational or irrational.
- **C (Consequences):** The emotional and behavioral consequences that result from the beliefs about the event.

For example:

- **A:** An athlete misses an important shot.
- **B:** "I'm terrible at this, and I'll never succeed."
- **C:** The athlete feels defeated, and anxious, and performs worse in future attempts.

Empirical Studies

Mentality and mental health are the most important components as the hardest worker ever in the NBA once said "Obsession always beats talent" Bryant Bryant. Mental health issues like performance anxiety, depression, Mentalities like all or nothing, overgeneralization, catastrophizing, Personalisation, and anxiety which are caused by pressure, personal issues, injuries, low re, wards and genetics can affect an athlete's performance, and mentality are the only metrics that affect the person's marketability and endorsement deals negatively. But confidence, having a grinding and obsessive mentality can also increase the likeability and the value of the athlete in the market which increases endorsements.

The Influence of Mental Health on Athlete Endorsements

Case Studies

1. Prithvi Shaw

Called the future talent, the star kid of the Indian cricket team Prithvi Shaw was the 7th youngest player to hit a century in test matches and it was on his debut. He had almost all the national awards in India which he still holds today, but had a big hit on his performance which led to him not playing for India since July 2021. The reason was discussed in an interview. This showed that Prithvi Shaw was the lack of support he had with him due to which he felt alone. *"If you ask me personally, it's very scary. Darr lagta hai aajkal to share my thoughts. Agle din social media mein aa jaata hai(I'm scared to share my thoughts. Somehow all of it comes up on social media). I've got very less friends, only a couple of friends, and even with them I don't share everything, only a few things,"*. Due to his recent hit in his performance in 2021, he got a lot of social media criticism which made him very anxious and variant what he says to everyone be it his close friends.

2. Dele Alli

With his outstanding performance world's worlds biggest stage the World Cup Dele Alli was playing with absolute grace and was about to become one of the legends of the new generation, he had everyone doing his celebration. But he is now considering retirement from professional football at the age of 24. He got addicted to sleeping pills and had a lot of mental issues. "I got addicted to sleeping tablets and it's probably a problem that not only I have. I think it's something that is going around more than realized life in football," Alli said. Alli was molested at just six years old by his mother's friend who was frequently present in his childhood home. He was then sent to Africa by his mother for him to "learn discipline,"

before being returned to England where he started smoking at the age of 7 years old and, at the age of 8 years old, he began to deal drugs. Due to his drug issues and his abuse when his performance went down he again began to find a way out which put him in a downward spiral and made him get more anxious and consider leaving professional football at the age of 24.

3. Giannis Antetokounmpo

Giannis faced all types of hardships, but due to his perseverance, hard work, and extraordinary talent, he is now an NBA MVP, Players Player of the Year (DPOY), Finals MVP, and champion. Giannis was raised in a neighborhood of Sepolia in Athens, where his parents struggled to make ends meet. He and his brothers would sell items like sunglasses and watches on the streets to help support the family. Despite these hardships, Giannis developed a love for basketball, alongside his older brother Thanasis. He started basketball late at the age of 12, which is old for NBA players, due to this he was drafted lower and his report said "At 6'9", Antetokounmpo makes up for muscle with mobility and agility. He's a small forward by nature, however, his versatile skill set and reported 7'3" wingspan should allow him to play multiple positions." He was drafted 15th overall in the 2013 draft. He was skinny tall fast and agile. But then due to his support from his family and brothers who are also professional basketball players now. He worked hard and got the most improved player in the NBA in the 2016-17 season. As a rookie contract Giannis made around 2.15 million USD per year (2013-16) and after his breakthrough series his contract went up to 1060% and he started earning 25 million USD per year. Then he won his first championship in 2021 and now he earns 48 million USD in the 24-25 season.

Media Coverage and Public Perception

Social media is the fastest in spreading a narrative. You have a bad game or a bad week you are scrutinized through trolling, memes and commentators, analysts, and the whole social media itself. You become the hot topic. For example each week in the NBA there is a show known as Shaqtin a Fool which looks at the funniest and the worst moments in the NBA for that week and it's hosted by Shaq. It is one of the most popular broadcasts of the NBA getting higher views than games itself sometimes. This shows how fast and how quickly a narrative follows around the world, especially in the sports industry. A bad narrative and your whole career is ruined. For example, Trae Young is a young fast, enthusiastic basketball athlete. Trae Young has been nicknamed a "coach killer" because of his reported clashes with multiple head coaches, including Lloyd Pierce and Nate McMillan, during his time with the Atlanta Hawks. His disagreements with these coaches, particularly over issues related to playing style, leadership, and game participation, have led to speculation that Young's influence contributed to their dismissals. Now the Atlanta Hawks and Trae Young have become a toxic place for any coach to go due to the narrative and this has affected his game and also his team's performance.

Social Media Influence

Social media has a lot of high expectations for young stars in the NBA. For example, in the 2023 NBA draft, the most pressure was on the number 1 and 3 picks Victor Wembanyama and Scoot Henderson. Due to this high pressure, Victor had strictly limited access to social media and due to the expectations not getting the best of him, he put up great numbers and won the Rookie of the Year award as well. Whereas Scoot Henderson was expected to be exceptionally great but he had a rough start since the NBA is the hardest league and the social media expectations got to his mentality and affected it negatively. He got his groove back in the last 1 game of the season even though these games were tougher his

performance grew. He averaged 11.1 points, and 4.5 assists in his first 20 games in his career. But in the last 20 games, he upped his performance and averaged 16.5 points and 6.9 assists which for rookies is impressive numbers because if we just look at his last 20 games his stats would have been the third highest tied with Chet Holmgren, highest assists.

Marketability of Athletes with Mental Health Issues

LeBron: LeBron James has successfully used his brand and platform to align with mental health causes, helping to bring awareness to these issues and create a positive impact on his overall brand image. Some of the benefits of aligning athlete brands with mental health causes, as well as the benefits of endorsements, include:

1. Enhancing Brand Authenticity and Relatability

LeBron's open discussions around mental health and well-being make him more relatable to both fans and the broader public. His initiatives show that even high-performing athletes experience similar struggles, which resonates with diverse audiences.

Authenticity in such spaces builds deeper trust and engagement with his brand. For example, through his "I PROMISE School" and related initiatives, LeBron has highlighted the importance of supporting mental health in education and beyond.

2. Expanding Brand Reach Beyond Sports

Aligning with mental health causes helps athletes like LeBron to reach new audiences outside of traditional sports enthusiasts. Partnering with mental health campaigns, and organizations, or creating social impact initiatives broadens his influence, connecting him with educators, parents, health professionals, and advocates.

This kind of alignment helps LeBron's brand transition into more of a lifestyle and social advocacy brand, enhancing his relevance and visibility in new areas.

3. Positive Impact on Endorsement Deals

Brands are increasingly looking for partners who have a positive social impact. Athletes who promote mental health awareness are seen as socially conscious and responsible, which can lead to more lucrative endorsement deals with companies that value corporate social responsibility (CSR).

For LeBron, his advocacy could attract partnerships with wellness-focused brands like Calm, Headspace, or other mental health services, adding to his diverse portfolio of endorsements.

4. Differentiation in the Athlete Market

The sports endorsement market is competitive. By positioning himself as a champion for mental health, LeBron differentiates his brand from other athletes. This helps him stand out in the market and makes him a top choice for endorsements that seek a unique value proposition beyond athletic performance.

5. Supporting the Longevity of the Athlete's Brand

An athlete's physical performance has a limited lifespan, but a reputation for advocacy and positive social impact can endure well beyond their active sports career. LeBron is building a brand legacy that will extend long after his retirement.

Aligning with social causes, such as mental health, can also enable athletes to pivot into other fields post-retirement, such as education, wellness, or even corporate roles focused on social impact.

6. Building a Community-Centric Brand

LeBron's brand focus on empowering and supporting underserved communities (such as through the LeBron James Family Foundation) is enhanced by his commitment to mental health advocacy. This builds

a community-centric image that enhances his brand and appeals to endorsements aimed at socially aware athletes.

Examples of LeBron's Mental Health Initiatives:

More Than An Athlete: His "More Than An Athlete" campaign, in collaboration with Uninterrupted, emphasizes athletes' voices in social issues and the need for holistic development, including mental well-being.

I PROMISE School: While primarily an educational initiative, it includes elements that support students' mental and emotional health, highlighting his comprehensive approach to these issues.

Aligning with mental health causes creates a win-win scenario for athlete brands. It not only brings attention to critical social issues but also strengthens the athletes' image as socially responsible role models, making them more appealing to both fans and potential endorsement partners. LeBron's strategic approach in this space has solidified his status as a leader both on and off the court.

LeBron James's initiatives, *More Than An Athlete* and the *I PROMISE School*, have significantly enhanced fan engagement and loyalty by creating deeper emotional connections and aligning his brand with values that resonate beyond basketball. Here's a detailed breakdown of how these initiatives affect fan engagement and loyalty:

1. Building Emotional Connection and Authenticity

- **More Than An Athlete:** This campaign, launched in collaboration with Uninterrupted, encourages athletes to embrace and promote their multifaceted identities, empowering them to speak out on social issues. For fans, seeing LeBron embrace his identity as not just a basketball player but also as a community advocate and role model makes him more authentic and relatable.

Fans appreciate when athletes use their platform for greater social good, making them more likely to support LeBron not just as a player, but as a person.

- **I PROMISE School:** By opening a school in his hometown of Akron, Ohio, LeBron demonstrates a deep commitment to uplifting underprivileged communities and providing long-term, transformative change. Fans see his genuine dedication to making a difference in people's lives, which strengthens their emotional connection to his brand.

This initiative, which offers educational and emotional support to at-risk children, positions LeBron as a true community leader, inspiring admiration and loyalty from fans who value social responsibility and education.

2. Aligning with Fans' Values

- LeBron's work with the *I PROMISE School* aligns with values like family, education, and opportunity, which resonate strongly with a broad audience. Fans who see him prioritizing these values are more likely to align themselves with his brand and support him outside of basketball.
- *More Than An Athlete* challenges the stereotype that athletes should "stick to sports," resonating with socially conscious fans who value activism and the right to speak out on broader issues. This alignment with modern societal values makes LeBron a powerful role model and leader, strengthening loyalty among fans who appreciate social justice and advocacy.

3. Driving Engagement through Social Impact Stories

- Both initiatives create compelling narratives that fans can follow and support. For instance, the *I PROMISE School* is not just a one-time project but an ongoing initiative, with stories about students' progress, new programs, and community involvement. This provides LeBron's fanbase with a contin-

ual stream of content that showcases his impact.

- *More Than An Athlete* extends beyond a single campaign and has become a movement. With multiple athletes participating and sharing their stories, it creates a sense of community and engagement where fans feel they're part of a broader social change, following the campaign's updates and participating in its message.

4. Establishing a Legacy Beyond the Court

- Through these initiatives, LeBron is building a legacy that extends far beyond his basketball achievements. This strengthens long-term loyalty, as fans want to be associated with someone who will be remembered not just for championships but for transformative social impact.
- By positioning himself as a leader who cares deeply about social change and community development, LeBron attracts lifelong support from fans who want to be part of a legacy that transcends the sport.

5. Inspiring Active Participation from Fans

- Both the *I PROMISE School* and *More Than An Athlete* have created opportunities for fans to get involved, whether through donations, spreading awareness, or participating in related community activities. This level of fan participation goes beyond passive support and turns fans into active contributors, deepening their sense of loyalty.
- Fans often share these initiatives on social media, creating a positive feedback loop where LeBron's efforts are amplified by the very people who admire him. This creates a strong community of supporters who are more likely to defend and champion his brand.

6. Increasing Brand Loyalty for Partner Endorsements

- Because these initiatives position LeBron as a figure of integrity and social impact, they also positively affect the perception of his endorsement partnerships. Brands associated with LeBron benefit from a "halo effect," where fans view those brands as supporting not just a successful athlete but a social leader.
- This increases brand loyalty for products endorsed by LeBron. For example, when Nike released its "More Than An Athlete" merchandise, it became more than just a product—it was seen as a symbol of the movement, resulting in high engagement and positive sentiment from fans.

7. Humanising LeBron as a Person, Not Just a Player

- These initiatives help humanize LeBron by showing his commitment to others, making him more than a distant superstar. For many fans, knowing that their favorite player is actively involved in initiatives that create real change makes them feel closer to him.
- The *I PROMISE School* also shows a personal side of LeBron's story, as he often shares how he relates to the students and wants to give them the support he did not have growing up. This relatability deepens fans' loyalty because they see him as someone who cares about where he came from and the struggles he overcame.

8. Expanding His Fanbase Beyond Basketball Enthusiasts

- These initiatives attract not just sports fans but people interested in social activism, education, and community development. This has expanded LeBron's fanbase to include educators, parents, social justice advocates, and others who may not have been traditional basketball fans.
- This broader fanbase is more likely to remain loyal even after LeBron retires from professional sports, as his impact goes beyond his playing career.

Kobe: Kobe Bryant, during and after his NBA career, was deeply invested in promoting mental toughness, resilience, and a mindset that prioritized well-being and personal growth. While he did not focus on mental

health causes in the traditional sense, Kobe's work emphasized mental strength, perseverance, and the “**Mamba Mentality**” — which has been embraced in the sports world as a philosophy that champions mental resilience.

1. Brand Alignment Through the "Mamba Mentality"

- Kobe’s “Mamba Mentality” is a philosophy that focuses on consistent self-improvement, overcoming adversity, and pushing mental limits to achieve greatness. This mindset has helped frame Kobe’s legacy around mental discipline and fortitude, which can also align with broader mental health conversations.
- His message was not just about excelling in sports, but about building mental habits that could be applied to any challenge, whether on the court, in business, or personal life. This made his brand inspiring to a wider audience beyond just athletes.

2. Inspiring Mental Resilience

- Kobe’s brand and messages around mental resilience inspired both professional athletes and everyday individuals. He spoke openly about overcoming anxiety, and self-doubt, and how to channel frustration into motivation.
- Though not focused specifically on clinical mental health issues, his narrative emphasized how to cultivate a positive mental approach to adversity — a theme that overlaps with mental health, particularly in high-stress situations.

3. Content Creation and Storytelling Around Mindset

- After retiring from the NBA, Kobe pivoted into storytelling, creating content that delved into mental fortitude and perseverance, such as his Oscar-winning short film *Dear Basketball*. His storytelling was rooted in pushing the boundaries of mental and emotional endurance, showing the power of mindset in achieving one’s dreams.
- Projects like his book, *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, provided insights into how he approached not just basketball, but life. The book highlighted how he coped with pressure, competition, and setbacks — themes that resonate deeply with conversations around mental health.

4. Supporting Youth Development and Emotional Resilience

- Through the Kobe & Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation, he supported programs that built up youth, focusing on creating safe spaces for emotional and mental growth.
- Although his brand did not focus solely on mental health, his emphasis on resilience, emotional strength, and mentorship helped young athletes navigate the psychological challenges of sports and life. This indirectly contributed to promoting a healthy mental state among youth.

5. Benefits for Athlete Brands and Endorsements

- Aligning with mental health causes, whether directly or through a broader focus on mental strength and resilience, offers significant benefits for athletes' brands and their appeal to endorsements.
- Broadening Appeal Beyond Sports: Like LeBron, Kobe’s focus on mental attributes made his brand relatable to business leaders, creatives, and everyday people, expanding his influence outside the athletic sphere.
- Building a Legacy of Emotional Empowerment: Kobe's narrative created a legacy not just of physical excellence, but of emotional and mental empowerment. Brands seeking a deeper connection with consumers found this alignment valuable.
- Endorsements Seeking Authentic Storytelling: Companies appreciate athletes with authentic and impactful narratives. Kobe’s journey, from overcoming personal challenges to his relentless pursuit of

excellence, provided a rich story for endorsements, which resonated well with fans. This led to partnerships with brands like Nike, which integrated the Mamba Mentality into their campaigns.

Examples of Kobe's Mental Health Alignment:

- Nike's Mamba Mentality Campaign: After his retirement, Nike continued to use the "Mamba Mentality" in its campaigns, highlighting how Kobe's mindset could be applied to everyday challenges, symbolizing perseverance and grit.
- "Dear Basketball": The animated short showcased not just his love for the sport, but the emotional journey of saying goodbye and transitioning from a beloved career — highlighting themes of identity, purpose, and mental health in the face of change.
- Differentiation from Other Athletes: While Kobe did not speak explicitly about mental health struggles in the same way that some modern athletes like Kevin Love or DeMar DeRozan have, his focus on the psychological aspects of success and his openness about mental training set him apart. This made his brand synonymous with mental mastery, a valuable trait for endorsements that look to highlight inspiration and motivation.

Kobe Bryant's initiatives, such as Nike's *Mamba Mentality* campaign and his Oscar-winning short film *Dear Basketball*, significantly impact fan engagement and loyalty by focusing on themes of mental resilience, dedication, and passion for excellence.

Key Effects on Fan Engagement and Loyalty:

1. Creating an Inspirational Narrative:

Mamba Mentality became more than a slogan; it's a philosophy that fans adopted as a lifestyle, symbolizing relentless self-improvement and perseverance. This mindset resonates deeply with both athletes and non-athletes, creating a shared identity among his supporters.

Dear Basketball captures Kobe's journey and passion for the sport, which evokes strong emotions and reminds fans of his dedication. It helps fans connect on a personal level, reinforcing admiration for his unwavering love for the game.

2. Building a Legacy of Mental Toughness:

Both initiatives emphasize Kobe's mental strength, which fans see as a blueprint for overcoming obstacles in their own lives. This legacy of resilience inspires fans to strive for excellence, making them more loyal and engaged.

By promoting these values, Kobe's brand becomes associated with not just athletic success, but also personal growth, making him a role model beyond sports.

3. Deepening Emotional Loyalty:

Dear Basketball showcases Kobe's farewell to the game, evoking nostalgia and emotional attachment. This deepens fans' emotional loyalty as they feel part of his personal journey and career evolution.

Mamba Mentality inspires fans to integrate his mindset into their daily lives, creating a continuous bond that extends well beyond his playing years.

4. Expanding His Influence Beyond Sports:

These initiatives appeal to a broader audience, including business leaders, creatives, and anyone pursuing excellence. This extends his fanbase and influence, attracting supporters who value perseverance and self-discipline.

Overall, Kobe's *Mamba Mentality* and *Dear Basketball* initiatives strengthen fan engagement by offering

a compelling narrative of mental resilience and passion. Fans feel more emotionally connected, inspired, and loyal, as these initiatives represent values they aspire to embody in their own lives.

While Kobe did not speak explicitly about mental health struggles in the same way that some modern athletes like Kevin Love or DeMar DeRozan have, his focus on the psychological aspects of success and his openness about mental training set him apart. This made his brand synonymous with mental mastery, a valuable trait for endorsements that look to highlight inspiration and motivation.

Negative Impacts on Marketability

Brands can face various challenges and risks when athletes experience poor mental health. Here are some key considerations:

1. Brand Reputation:

- **Negative Public Perception:** If an athlete publicly discusses their mental health struggles, it may lead to negative perceptions of the brand associated with them, especially if they are perceived as not supporting the athlete.
- **Association with Scandals:** If mental health issues lead to erratic behavior or controversies, brands can be linked to negative media coverage.

2. Marketing and Sponsorship Issues:

- **Endorsement Fallout:** Brands may face backlash or have to reconsider partnerships if an athlete's mental health issues become a focal point of public discussion.
- **Decreased Marketability:** Athletes who are struggling may not be able to engage in promotional activities, affecting the visibility and effectiveness of marketing campaigns.

3. Consumer Sentiment:

- **Changing Consumer Attitudes:** As awareness of mental health increases, consumers may expect brands to take a stance on mental health issues. Brands that fail to do so may lose favor with consumers.
- **Impact on Sales:** If consumers feel a brand mishandles an athlete's mental health crisis, they may choose to boycott the brand or switch to competitors.

4. Legal and Financial Risks:

- **Contractual Issues:** If an athlete is unable to fulfill their contractual obligations due to mental health issues, brands may face financial repercussions or legal disputes.
- **Insurance Costs:** Increased focus on mental health may lead to higher insurance costs for brands covering athletes.

5. Corporate Responsibility:

- **Need for Support Programs:** Brands may be expected to implement support programs for athletes, which can require significant investment and resources.
- **Balancing Performance and Well-being:** Brands need to navigate the fine line between promoting performance and supporting athletes' mental health, which can be challenging in high-pressure sports environments.

6. Crisis Management:

- **Reputation Management:** Brands must be prepared to handle crises related to athletes' mental health, including crafting public responses and potentially engaging in social media campaigns to address concerns.
- **Transparency Challenges:** Brands may struggle with how much to disclose about an athlete's situation while respecting privacy and ensuring transparency with their audience.

7. Impact on Team Dynamics:

- **Team Morale and Performance:** An athlete's mental health issues can affect team dynamics, potentially impacting overall performance and brand representation in competitions.

8. Long-term Implications:

- **Sustained Attention:** Ongoing mental health issues can lead to prolonged media attention and scrutiny, affecting long-term brand strategy and athlete relationships.

Examples of decreased marketability due to mental health issues

Athletes who experience mental health issues can face significant impacts on their marketability, especially in highly visible and competitive environments. The stigma associated with mental health concerns can diminish an athlete's public image, lead to a loss of endorsement deals, and affect how they are perceived by teams and fans.

1. **Naomi Osaka:** The Japanese tennis star's decision to withdraw from the 2021 French Open due to anxiety about media interactions drew polarized reactions. While she garnered praise for prioritizing her mental health, it also resulted in a temporary suspension of endorsement activities and scrutiny of her professionalism, which might have influenced her overall market appeal. Despite this, some sponsors like Nike and Mastercard continued to support her, reflecting a shift toward valuing athlete well-being over performance alone.
2. **Simone Biles:** During the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Simone Biles withdrew from several gymnastics events, citing mental health challenges. This decision sparked a global conversation about the pressures on elite athletes. Although her marketability was not permanently damaged due to her pre-existing status as a mental health advocate, the immediate backlash from certain media and fan circles showed the risk athletes face in similar situations.
3. **Michael Phelps:** The Olympic swimmer openly struggled with depression and anxiety throughout his career. Although Phelps became a prominent advocate for mental health, his initial admissions were met with confusion and doubt about his competitive resilience. For athletes not as established or iconic, similar disclosures could negatively influence market value, particularly in sports where "mental toughness" is prized.

Factors Affecting Marketability:

- **Stigma and Perception:** Mental health struggles are sometimes perceived as signs of weakness in competitive sports environments, which can diminish an athlete's image as a strong, dependable performer. This affects how brands, fans, and organizations value them, potentially leading to fewer endorsements and a drop in public appearances ([Berkeley News](#)).
- **Inconsistent Performance:** Athletes dealing with mental health issues often experience inconsistent performances, which can lead to reduced trust from sponsors and teams. Companies invest in athletes not just for their past performance but also for their reliability as brand ambassadors, and mental health crises can challenge this perception ([Frontiers](#)).

While the trend is shifting towards a more empathetic and supportive response, the marketability of athletes who openly deal with mental health issues can still be compromised, depending on the public and media's reaction to their disclosures and subsequent actions.

Brands have increasingly shown support for athletes dealing with mental health challenges, often implementing dedicated programs or campaigns to foster open conversations and provide resources. Here

are a few notable real-life examples:

- 1. Allianz:** As a Worldwide Olympic Partner, Allianz launched “The Pause” campaign, which emphasizes mindfulness and encourages athletes to take a step back to reflect and listen to their needs. They also provided emotional support dogs to help Olympic athletes like skateboarders Leticia Bufoni and Dashawn Jordan reduce anxiety during training, showing a commitment to tangibly addressing mental health. The company partnered with athletes such as Lindsey Vonn to share personal mental health stories, further normalizing these discussions ([Olympics](#)).
- 2. Airbnb:** In collaboration with the IOC and IPC, Airbnb introduced the "Olympian & Paralympian Experiences" initiative, enabling athletes to host sessions and connect with fans worldwide. This program allows retired athletes to find purpose beyond competition, helping with mental well-being and the difficult transition post-retirement. Athletes like Simon Whitfield, a former Canadian triathlete, reported that these engagements provided a sense of fulfillment and stability ([Olympics](#)).
- 3. Procter & Gamble (P&G):** P&G launched the “Athletes for Good” program before the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which provides funding to help athletes support causes they care about, including mental health. This initiative not only gives back to the community but also offers athletes a platform to speak about their struggles, creating a positive narrative around mental health ([Olympics](#)).
- 4. Nike and Simone Biles:** When Simone Biles, a Nike-sponsored athlete, withdrew from the Tokyo 2021 Olympic events to prioritize her mental health, Nike expressed support and acknowledged her bravery in choosing mental well-being over performance. This backing strengthened the brand’s image as one that prioritizes the holistic well-being of athletes ([People.com](#)).
- 5. Naomi Osaka and her Sponsors:** After Naomi Osaka withdrew from the 2021 French Open to focus on her mental health, sponsors like Nike and Sweetgreen stood by her decision. Sweetgreen, for example, reiterated its commitment to supporting Osaka’s values and overall well-being, transforming potential backlash into a positive affirmation of athlete wellness ([People.com](#))

Business Implications and Strategies

As the importance of mental health in professional sports becomes increasingly recognized, athlete contracts need to include specific clauses addressing this crucial aspect. Here are some standard contractual clauses that can be incorporated into athlete contracts to protect their mental well-being:

1. Mental Health Leave

- **Purpose:** To allow athletes to take time off to address mental health concerns without fear of repercussions.
- **Clause Example:** "The Athlete shall be entitled to take a leave of absence to address mental health concerns. Such leave shall be unpaid but shall not result in any disciplinary action or loss of benefits."

2. Confidentiality and Privacy

- **Purpose:** To protect athletes' privacy and prevent discrimination or stigma associated with mental health issues.
- **Clause Example:** "The Team agrees to maintain the confidentiality of any information related to the Athlete's mental health. Any disclosure of such information without the Athlete's express consent shall be considered a breach of this Agreement."

3. Access to Mental Health Resources

- **Purpose:** To ensure athletes have access to necessary mental health support services.
- **Clause Example:** "The Team shall provide the Athlete with access to qualified mental health profes-

ionals at no cost to the Athlete. The Team shall also cover the costs of any necessary mental health treatment or medication."

4. Performance-Based Pressure and Mental Health

- **Purpose:** To address the unique pressures athletes face and their potential impact on mental health.
- **Clause Example:** "The Team acknowledges the demanding nature of professional sports and its potential impact on the Athlete's mental health. The Team shall take reasonable steps to mitigate the effects of performance-based pressure on the Athlete's well-being."

5. Anti-Discrimination and Harassment

- **Purpose:** To protect athletes from discrimination or harassment based on mental health conditions.
- **Clause Example:** "The Team shall not discriminate against or harass the Athlete based on any mental health condition. Any such discrimination or harassment shall be considered a breach of this Agreement."

Performance-Based Incentives and Mental Health

- **Purpose:** To ensure that performance-based incentives do not create undue pressure on athletes' mental health.
- **Clause Example:** "While the Team may establish performance-based incentives, such incentives shall not be structured in a manner that creates excessive pressure on the Athlete's mental health."

Additional Considerations

- **Consultation with Mental Health Experts:** When drafting these clauses, it's advisable to consult with mental health professionals to ensure they are comprehensive and effective.
- **Ongoing Evaluation and Adjustment:** As the understanding of mental health in sports evolves, it may be necessary to review and update these clauses to reflect current best practices.

By incorporating these clauses into athlete contracts, teams can demonstrate their commitment to the mental well-being of their athletes and create a more supportive environment for them to thrive.

Risk management strategies for brands

Proactive Strategies:

1. Mental Health Education:

- **Educate Staff:** Train employees to recognize signs of mental health distress and respond appropriately.
- **Create a Supportive Culture:** Foster an environment where athletes feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns.

2. Contractual Safeguards:

- **Mental Health Clauses:** Include clauses in athlete contracts addressing mental health concerns, such as leave policies, access to resources, and confidentiality.
- **Performance-Based Incentives:** Ensure incentives do not create undue pressure on athletes' mental health.

3. Crisis Communication Plan:

- **Develop a Plan:** Create a detailed plan outlining steps to be taken if an athlete's mental health issues become public.
- **Designate a Spokesperson:** Identify a spokesperson who can communicate effectively and empathetically.

- **Prepare Messaging:** Develop key messages that address the athlete's well-being, the brand's support, and any actions being taken.
- 4. Diversification:**
 - **Multiple Athletes:** Avoid relying solely on a single athlete for brand promotion.
 - **Non-Athlete Endorsements:** Consider partnering with non-athlete celebrities or influencers.
- 5. Reputation Management:**
 - **Monitor Online Sentiment:** Track public opinion and social media conversations.
 - **Address Negative Comments:** Respond promptly and respectfully.
 - **Crisis Management Tools:** Utilize tools to monitor online discussions and mitigate damage.
- 6. Public Relations Strategy:**
 - **Emphasize Support:** Publicly express support for the athlete and their well-being.
 - **Humanize the Athlete:** Share stories about their character, accomplishments, and contributions.
 - **Manage Negative Publicity:** Address negative coverage with empathy and understanding.

Additional Considerations

- **Collaborate with Mental Health Experts:** Partner with mental health professionals to develop effective strategies and provide resources.
- **Regular Reviews:** Evaluate and update risk management plans as needed to reflect evolving best practices and industry trends.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Ensure all actions align with ethical principles and respect the athlete's privacy and well-being.

Case Examples of Contract Adjustments

Simone Biles and the Olympics

- **Withdrawal and Return:** Simone Biles' decision to withdraw from the Tokyo Olympics due to mental health concerns highlighted the importance of prioritizing athlete well-being. While her contract with USA Gymnastics likely wasn't formally altered, the experience led to increased conversations about mental health in elite sports and potentially influenced future contract negotiations for athletes.

Ryan Giggs and Manchester United

- **Reduced Role:** While not directly tied to mental health, Ryan Giggs' reduced playing time and eventual retirement from Manchester United were influenced by factors including age and physical limitations. However, the intense pressure and scrutiny associated with elite sports can contribute to mental health challenges, and Giggs' decision may have been influenced by a desire to prioritize his well-being.

Naomi Osaka and the Australian Open

- **Withdrawal and Fines:** Naomi Osaka's withdrawal from the 2021 Australian Open due to mental health concerns led to discussions about the pressures faced by athletes and the need for greater support. While she was fined for withdrawing, the incident raised awareness about the importance of prioritizing mental health and potentially influenced future negotiations regarding athlete well-being.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between athlete mental health, performance, and marketability highlights the

profound impact of psychological well-being on both individual careers and the sports industry at large. As explored in this paper, mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and burnout significantly influence athletes' performance, endorsements, and public perception. Notable case studies, including those of Prithvi Shaw, Dele Alli, and Giannis Antetokounmpo, illustrate how psychological struggles or resilience can define market trajectories and brand partnerships.

Social media has emerged as a double-edged sword, amplifying scrutiny while providing a platform for advocacy and relatability. While mental health issues may temporarily reduce an athlete's marketability, the increasing focus on mental health awareness and the alignment of brands with socially conscious causes signal a transformative shift. Athletes like Simone Biles, Naomi Osaka, and LeBron James have demonstrated that prioritizing mental health not only fosters personal well-being but also cultivates authentic and enduring brand value.

To ensure sustainable success, stakeholders—including sponsors, teams, and athletes themselves—must prioritize mental health through supportive initiatives, tailored contracts, and an empathetic approach to crisis management. By addressing the stigma surrounding mental health and embracing holistic athlete care, the sports industry can redefine its metrics for success, ensuring a balance between performance and well-being. This paradigm shift not only enhances the careers of athletes but also resonates deeply with fans and consumers, who increasingly value transparency and humanity in the brands and individuals they support.

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