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Research Article

Being an Athlete in the Digital World: An Evaluation on Identity and Addiction in Generation Alpha

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between athlete identity perception and internet addiction levels among Alpha Generation athletes, who have grown up immersed in the digital era, considering a range of demographic, sporting, and technological factors. The research sample comprised 354 licensed athletes, including 184 females and 170 males. Data were obtained using a Personal Information Form, the Young Internet Addiction Test–Short Form, and the Athlete Identity Scale. Statistical analyses were conducted with SPSS 23.0, applying both parametric and non-parametric tests based on the distribution characteristics of the data. Group differences were examined using independent samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), while Pearson correlation analysis assessed associations between variables. Results indicated a weak yet statistically significant negative correlation between athlete identity and internet addiction. Furthermore, individual sport athletes demonstrated higher athlete identity scores than their counterparts in team sports. Internet addiction levels also varied significantly according to the mother's education level and the type of digital device used. Overall, the findings suggest that young athletes' personal development within digital environments is closely linked to their media consumption patterns, and that this dynamic is influenced by environmental conditions.

Keywords: Athlete identity, internet addiction, generation alpha, digital media use.

1. Introduction

Rapid technological advancements have deeply transformed daily life, influencing education, social interaction, body image, and identity construction (Holloway et al., 2013; Prensky, 2001). Within this transformation, athlete identity—defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role and integrates it into their self-concept (Brewer et al., 1993)—has also evolved. Athlete identity shapes how individuals perceive themselves, set goals, and regulate behaviors within and beyond the sporting context. A strong and positive athlete identity is generally associated with higher motivation, persistence, and psychological resilience (Horton & Mack, 2000; Cosh et al., 2013). However, when the athletic role becomes overly central, it may restrict self-concept flexibility and increase vulnerability to psychological distress, particularly during injury, performance decline, or transition periods (Lally, 2007).

In parallel, internet addiction—conceptualized as excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges, or behaviors related to Internet use that lead to impairment or distress (Young, 1998; Kuss & Griffiths, 2015)—has emerged as a major psychosocial issue among digital natives. Internet addiction often manifests through compulsive social media use, gaming, or continuous online connectivity, which can disrupt everyday routines and emotional regulation. Previous studies have also reported that excessive online engagement among adolescents is associated with lower levels of self-control and increased symptoms of digital dependency (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Montag et al., 2019; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). In the context of sports, Toth-Kiraly et al. (2021) found that problematic internet use negatively predicted athletes'

psychological well-being and perceived competence. Adolescents and young athletes are considered particularly vulnerable, as their developmental stage coincides with increased digital exposure and identity exploration (Anderson et al., 2017).

In this context, athlete identity and internet addiction demonstrate a bidirectional relationship within contemporary digital culture. On one hand, digital platforms allow athletes to construct, express, and reinforce their athletic identities by sharing training routines, competition outcomes, and personal achievements (Boyd, 2014; Marwick, 2013). These online performances often enhance motivation and social recognition but may simultaneously promote dependence on external validation. On the other hand, excessive engagement with online content in pursuit of social approval may amplify social comparison tendencies, reinforce extrinsic motivation, and contribute to addictive behavioral patterns (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Twenge, 2019). Thus, while digital spaces provide opportunities for identity development, they may also create pressures that undermine psychological autonomy and stability (Andreassen et al., 2017).

For Generation Alpha—individuals born after 2010 and recognized as "digital natives"—sport functions not only as a means of physical performance but also as a medium of self-presentation, social validation, and digital visibility. As these young athletes navigate between real-world competition and virtual expression, understanding the interplay between athlete identity and internet addiction becomes crucial. This interaction may influence motivation, self-concept, and mental well-being, shaping both athletic development and lifestyle behaviors. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between athlete identity perception and internet addiction among Generation Alpha athletes, considering variables such as type of sport, duration of sports participation, preferred digital device, and parental education. By addressing these factors, the study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on sports sciences and human health, offering insights for preventive and educational strategies in sports psychology, media literacy, and youth well-being. In line with the research aim, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H_1: There is a significant negative relationship between athlete identity and internet addiction among Generation Alpha athletes.
H_2: Athlete identity levels differ significantly according to the type of sport (individual vs. team).
H_3: Internet addiction levels differ significantly according to parental education level.
H_4: Athlete identity and internet addiction levels vary depending on the type of digital device used.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Model

The present study employed a descriptive survey design, which is frequently preferred in the social sciences to provide a detailed portrayal of an existing situation without manipulating the variables (Büyüköztürk et al., 2021). This approach focuses on identifying, describing, and documenting the characteristics of the phenomena under investigation rather than examining their underlying causes (Creswell, 2014). By offering a systematic and objective depiction, descriptive survey models contribute to establishing a foundational understanding of the research subject, which can guide future experimental or longitudinal studies (Cohen et al., 2018). According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2009), descriptive designs allow researchers to obtain a snapshot of current conditions, attitudes, or behaviors of a population, ensuring ecological validity while minimizing researcher interference. Similarly, Neuman (2014) emphasizes that descriptive surveys provide valuable baseline data for comparative and explanatory research, especially when examining social and behavioral patterns across diverse groups. Therefore, this method was deemed appropriate for the present study to explore the current state of athlete identity and internet addiction among Generation Alpha athletes in a naturalistic context.

2.2. Research Group

The research group consisted of children and young athletes from the Alpha Generation. The sample size was determined through a power analysis conducted with the G*Power 3.1.9.7 software. Following Cohen's (1988) effect size classification, the parameters were set as a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$), a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, and a statistical power of $1\text{-}\beta = 0.95$. An a priori power analysis based on a one-way ANOVA test was performed to estimate the minimum required sample size. This calculation indicated that at least 354 participants were needed. Consequently,

the study included exactly 354 athletes, of whom 184 were female and 170 were male. The participants' mean age was 12.77 years, with an average of 1.88 years of sports participation experience and an average daily internet usage time of 2.99 hours.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	Min-Max	Avarage	SD
Age	8-15	12.77	1.77
Duration of sport (year)	2-6	3.73	1.56
Internet usage time (hours)	0.5-4	2.47	1.16

min: minimum, max: maximum, SD: standard deviation

Table 1 presents the minimum–maximum values, mean, and standard deviation for age, duration of sport participation, and daily internet usage time.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Data for the study were obtained using three instruments: a Personal Information Form, the Young Internet Addiction Test–Short Form (YIAT-SF), and the Athlete Identity Scale. Before commencing data collection, all participants were briefed regarding the purpose, scope, and procedures of the research, and their voluntary participation was ensured.

2.3.1. Personal information form

Developed by the researchers, this form collected demographic and technological data, including participants' gender, age, sports branch, age at which they began sports, parental education level, daily internet usage duration, and the technological devices they most frequently used.

2.3.2. Young internet addiction test – short form (YIAT-SF)

Initially developed by Young (1998) to assess problematic internet use, the instrument was later shortened by Pawlikowski et al. (2013) to create a more concise measure suitable for research and clinical settings. The scale consists of 12 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), with no reverse-coded items. Total scores range from 12 to 60, where higher scores reflect greater levels of internet addiction. The Turkish adaptation and psychometric validation were conducted by Kutlu et al. (2016), who reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86, indicating high internal consistency. Cross-cultural studies have similarly supported the reliability and validity of the short form in different populations (Laconi et al., 2019).

2.3.3. Athlete identity scale

Developed by Brewer and Cornelius (2001) and translated into Turkish by Öztürk and Koca (2013), this scale is designed to assess the extent of athlete identity. It comprises seven items distributed across three sub-dimensions: social identity, sport-related limitations, and negative affectivity. Participants respond using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For the entire scale, the internal consistency coefficient was reported as 0.81, while the reliability coefficients for the sub-dimensions were 0.69, 0.79, and 0.59, respectively.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data collected for the study were analyzed using the SPSS 23.0 statistical software package. To assess whether the numerical variables exhibited a normal distribution, kurtosis and skewness coefficients were examined, supported by the evaluation of histogram plots. In line with Pituch and Stevens (2016), values of kurtosis and skewness falling within the ±1.5 range were deemed indicative of a normal distribution. Based on this assessment, parametric statistical methods were applied to datasets meeting the normality assumption, whereas non-parametric methods were preferred for those that did not satisfy this criterion.

2.5. Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Aksaray University Human Research Ethics Committee with the decision dated 18 April 2025 and protocol number 2025-203 (Document No: E-34183927-020-00001067032).

3. Results

Table 2. Statistics related to athlete identity scale and Young Internet Addiction test

Variables	Min-max scores that can be obtained from the scales	Average	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
SK	15-49	41.80	5.58	-1.73	3.36
YIAT	13-48	26.51	7.14	0.45	-0.12

SD: Athlete Identity, YIAT: Young Internet Addiction Test, min: minimum, max: maximum, SD: Standard deviation

An analysis of the descriptive statistics indicated that participants' scores on the Athlete Identity Scale ranged from 15 to 49, with a mean of 41.8 ± 5.58. This suggests that the overall athlete identity level within the sample is comparatively high. Regarding the Young Internet Addiction Scale, the attainable scores varied between 13 and 48, and the participants' mean score was 26.51 ± 7.14. These results imply that their internet addiction tendencies generally fall within the low to moderate range.

Table 3. Correlation analysis between variables

Variables	Correlation		p		N	
SK- YIAT	-0.147		.006**		354	
	Internet Usage Time			Sport Duration		
	Correlation	p	N	Correlation	p	N
SK	0.03	.48	354	.15	.006**	354
YIAT	0.34	.001**	354	-0.09	.07	354

**SK:Athlete Identity, YIAT:Young Internet Addiction Test; **: p<.01*

The analysis indicated a weak negative correlation between the two variables (r = –0.147; p = .006). Since the p-value is lower than the .01 significance level, this association is statistically significant. This outcome implies that as participants' internet addiction levels increase, their athlete identity levels tend to decrease. However, the relatively small correlation coefficient demonstrates that the relationship is weak in magnitude. Moreover, the findings revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between daily internet usage duration and internet addiction scores, suggesting that increased time spent online corresponds to higher addiction scores. No significant correlation was identified between the duration of sports participation and internet addiction. On the other hand, a statistically significant but low positive correlation was found between the total athlete identity scores and the length of time participants had been involved in sports, indicating that longer engagement in sports is associated with higher athlete identity scores. In contrast, there was no significant relationship between athlete identity total scores and the time spent using the internet.

Table 4. Statistical analyses related to parents' education status of athletes

Variables	Group	Mother's Education Status				Father's Education Status			
		N	Average	SS	p	N	Average	SS	p
SK	University graduate	190	41.53	5.54	.256	197	41.42	5.26	.199
	Not a university graduate	164	42.11	5.62		157	42.27	5.81	
YIAT	University graduate	190	27.38	5.89	.012*	197	27.13	6.27	.071
	Not a university graduate	164	25.50	7.99		157	26.75	7.73	

**: p<.05*

The findings showed that 53.68% of the participants' mothers had graduated from a university, while 46.33% had not. Regarding fathers' education levels, 55.65% were university graduates, and 44.35% were not. Results from the independent samples t-test indicated a statistically significant difference in internet addiction scores based on mothers' educational status (p = .012). Specifically, the children of mothers with a university education had significantly lower internet addiction scores compared to the children of mothers without a university degree.

Table 5. Statistical analysis according to sports branches

Branch	SK				YIAT			
	Averege	SS	Statistics	p	Average	SS	Statistics	p
Football	41.88	6.21			25.87	6.03		
Swim	43.17	4.08			26.74	7.25		
Volleyball	41.52	4.81	H=16.86	.002*	24.97	6.31	F=2.75	.028*
Basketball	39.39	6.77			28.73	8.11		
Athletics	43.35	4.54			27.02	8.54		
Comparisons	Average row is different			p	Average differences			p
Football-Swim	-8.32			.276	-0.86			.931
Football-Volleyball	8.02			.294	0.90			.921
Football-Basketball	18.73			.012	-2.86			.092
Football-Athletics	-9.00			.224	-1.15			.910
Swim-Volleyball	15.06			.036	1.76			.532
Swim-Basketball	23.75			.001***	-1.99			.457
Swim-Athletics	-3.44			.602	-0.28			.990
Volleyball-Basketball	11.72			.089	-3.76			.016*
Volleyball-Athletics	-14.07			.033	-2.05			.572
Basketball-Athletics	-19.06			.002***	1.70			.750

**: p<.05; ***: p<.005; Mean: Average*

Among the participants, interest was distributed across several sports: 27.1% reported interest in soccer, 21.8% in swimming, 21.7% in volleyball, 18.1% in basketball, and 11.3% in athletics. Kruskal-Wallis H test was applied to determine whether the athlete identity scores differed according to the sports branches. As a result of the analysis, a statistically significant difference was found between the groups (p= .002). ANOVA test was performed for the relationship between Internet addiction and branches and a significant difference was found between the branches (p=.028). The difference between the branches in internet addiction was determined by Tukey test. The difference between volleyball and basketball branches was found statistically significant (p=.016). The mean Internet addiction scores of the athletes in the basketball branch were found to be higher than those of the athletes in the volleyball branch. Since the number of pairwise comparisons made to determine between which branches the athlete identity scores differed was high, Bonferroni correction was applied to reduce the risk of type I error. This correction was obtained by dividing the significance level (p=.05) by the number of comparisons (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Accordingly, the adjusted significance level for 10 comparisons was taken as .005. According to the results, the difference between swimming-basketball and basketball-athletics branches was statistically significant. The mean rank value of the athlete identity of the athletes in the swimming branch was significantly higher than the mean rank value of the athletes in the basketball branch.

Table 6. Comparative statistical analysis of athlete identity and Young internet addiction scores according to sport type

Variables	Sport Type	N	Average rank-mean	SD	p
SK	Team	237	165.44	6.03	.002*
	Individual	117	201.93	4.23	
YIAT	Team	237	26.35	6.88	.565
	Individual	117	26.83	7.68	

**: p<.05*

The Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference in Athlete Identity Scale scores between participants engaged in individual sports and those involved in team sports. The analysis revealed that the mean rank for team sport participants was 165.44, whereas the mean rank for individual sport participants was 201.93. These results indicate that individual sport athletes scored higher on athlete identity compared to team sport athletes. To assess whether there was a significant difference in Young Internet Addiction Scale scores between

individual and team sport participants, an Independent Samples t-test was performed. The findings showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Table 7. Statistical analysis of athlete identity and Young internet addiction scores according to the technological device used by the athletes

Technological Equipment	SK				YIAT			
	Average	SS	Statistics	p	Ort.	SD	Statistics	p
Cell Phone	42.39	4.77			26.84	7.12		
Tablet	38.84	8.17			25.34	7.02		
Computer	39.52	5.53			27.23	8.00		
Television	41.50	5.46	H=11.36	.023*	20.10	3.98	F=2.51	.041*
Other	41.85	8.69			26.71	6.75		
Comparisons	Average rank difference			p	Mean Differences			p
Cell Phone-Tablet	38.85			.012	1.51			.730
Cell Phone-Computer	44.94			.018	-0.39			.999
Cell Phone-Television	12.60			.629	6.75			.003*
Cell Phone-Other	-13.63			.545	0.13			.999
Tablet-Computer	0.51			.912	-1.89			.892
Tablet-Television	-4.11			.408	5.24			.036*
Tablet-Other	-7.33			.121	-1.37			.966
Television-Computer	3.03			.385	-7.14			.019*
Television-Other	-1.80			.537	-6.61			.041*
Computer-Other	5.72			.105	0.52			.999

**: p<.05*

The results indicated that 76.6% of the participants primarily used mobile phones, 10.7% used tablets, 5.9% used computers, 2.8% used televisions, and 4% used other technological devices. To examine whether athlete identity scores varied according to the type of technological device used, a Kruskal–Wallis H test was performed. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess differences in internet addiction scores across device categories. The results revealed statistically significant differences in both athlete identity scores (p = .023) and internet addiction scores (p = .041) based on the technological devices used. For athlete identity scores, Mann–Whitney U tests were employed for pairwise comparisons. However, after applying the Bonferroni correction, no statistically significant differences emerged, suggesting that the overall difference may be distributed across multiple groups without reaching significance in individual pairwise comparisons. This finding confirms the presence of a general difference but does not clearly identify which specific groups account for it. For internet addiction scores, the Games–Howell test was used in post hoc pairwise comparisons. The results showed that participants who primarily used televisions had significantly lower internet addiction scores compared to those who used mobile phones (p = .003), tablets (p = .036), computers (p = .019), and other technological devices (p = .047).

4. Discussion

In this study, the levels of athlete identity and internet addiction of Generation Alpha athletes were examined in terms of various demographic, sportive and technological variables. The findings show that there is a weak but significant negative relationship between athlete identity and internet addiction. This is in line with previous studies suggesting that time spent in the digital environment may negatively affect the development of athlete identity (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Twenge, 2019; Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016; Andreassen, 2015). Similarly, Li et al. (2020) found that higher levels of digital media exposure among adolescent athletes were associated with decreased concentration and reduced athletic identity commitment. Pavlas et al. (2022) also reported that athletes with stronger identity commitment exhibited lower susceptibility to problematic internet use, supporting the protective role of athletic involvement. The positive relationship between the duration of sport participation and athlete identity supports the strengthening role of regular sport participation in identity formation. Brewer and Cornelius (2001) emphasize that sport experience is one of the most important determinants of athlete identity, while Gould et al. (2002) state that long-term sport participation

reinforces an individual's self-perception. Similarly, Coakley (2009) and Eime et al. (2013) state that regular physical activity increases self-efficacy, social identity and sense of belonging in young individuals. In parallel, Kırıkoğlu and Balçıkanlı (2024) highlighted that sustained engagement in sport fosters fair play orientations and ethical decision-making, which further contribute to the internalization of athlete identity and personal values. In this context, it can be said that practices that promote the continuity of sport are critical not only for physical performance but also for identity development.

The results obtained by sport branch revealed that athletes in individual sports such as swimming and athletics had significantly higher athlete identity scores than basketball players. This finding can be explained by the self-regulation, taking responsibility and independent decision-making processes inherent in individual sports. Hardy et al. (1996) state that individual athletes have high levels of self-awareness, which reinforces the perception of athlete identity. Furthermore, Allen (2003) states that individual athletes have a closer relationship with personal goal setting and intrinsic motivation, while Van Raalte and Brewer (2002) argue that individual sports have a deeper impact on self-identity and self-awareness. Consistent with these results, Balduck and Jowett (2020) emphasized that the individual nature of sports such as athletics and swimming encourages stronger personal goal orientation and identity centrality compared to team-based contexts. Similarly, Choi and Kim (2021) found that athletes participating in individual sports displayed higher self-reflection and psychological resilience, which may explain their stronger identity scores. The fact that basketball players have higher internet addiction scores than volleyball players suggests that social media interactions and spending time online may be more intense in some branches of team sports. Kuss and Griffiths (2015) state that the motivation for social bonding may increase the time spent in the digital environment, which may increase the risk of addiction. In addition, Montag et al. (2019) emphasize that individuals' intensity of social media use is directly related to their psychosocial needs and their level of dependency on digital communication. Therefore, it is important to note that different sports branches are not only physical and technical, but also digital.

The findings regarding mother's education level showed that the internet addiction scores of the children of university graduate mothers were significantly higher. This may be explained by the fact that children of parents with higher education levels have more access to digital tools and can exhibit more flexible attitudes towards technology use. Holloway et al. (2013) reported that children from families with higher socioeconomic status have higher levels of online activity and that these children access digital environments at an earlier age. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) also found that parental education level has a significant effect on the amount of time children spend in digital environments. Similarly, Nikken and Schols (2015) reported that higher parental education levels were associated with increased access to devices among children, but not necessarily with more effective parental mediation, suggesting that digital literacy education should accompany technological access to prevent excessive use. However, when this increased access does not always go hand in hand with conscious usage habits, the risk of addiction may increase. Valkenburg et al. (2013) state that children's self-control skills are more determinant than parental control in digital media use. Therefore, it is important to support digital awareness and self-control skills within the family, even if parents have a high level of education (Kabali et al., 2015).

In the comparison made according to sport type, it was determined that the athlete identity scores of individual athletes were higher than those of team athletes. This result suggests that personal responsibility, self-discipline and direct performance feedback processes inherent in individual sports support identity development. Martin and Gill (1991) state that individual athletes have stronger intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy perceptions, which reinforces their sense of identity. In addition, the self-determination theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000) argues that identity is more firmly established in environments where individual success is focused on. In team sports, on the other hand, the integration of performance into a collective structure may relegate individual identity development to the background (Weinberg & Gould, 2018; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Interestingly, the fact that there was no significant difference between individual and team sports in terms of internet addiction scores suggests that digital addiction is shaped by personal habits and environmental factors rather than the way of participation in sports. In this context, Griffiths (2005) and Spada (2014) state that an individual's psychological predispositions and social environment are more determinant in the development of digital addiction.

While the results of technological device use revealed that the cell phone was by far the most commonly used device, athletes who used television had significantly lower internet addiction scores compared to other device users. This

finding is in line with Young (1998) and Kuss and Griffiths (2015) who suggest that interactive media tools may increase the risk of addiction. Interactive devices such as cell phones, tablets, and computers facilitate access to platforms that require constant connectivity, such as social media and online gaming, which may lead to increased usage time and addiction risk (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Montag et al., 2021). Furthermore, it has also been reported that interactive digital content activates the brain reward system and therefore carries the potential for increased arousal and addiction (Brand et al., 2016). In this context, it can be said that not only the duration of digital device use but also the level of interaction is critical for addiction.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the levels of athlete identity and internet addiction in Generation Alpha athletes in terms of various variables and revealed that these two constructs are interrelated. The findings showed that the duration of doing sports supports the development of athlete identity, individual sports are more advantageous in identity construction, and the types of technological devices used can affect the risk of digital addiction. In addition, it was concluded that parental education level may be a determinant on children's access to and use habits of digital technology. In this context, it can be said that there is a need for multidimensional approaches to strengthen digital awareness and self-control skills simultaneously with structures that support the identity development of young athletes. The data obtained show that the combination of sport psychology, digital media literacy and family-based education models can be effective in developing healthy digital habits and strengthening the sport identity of young people.

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Declaration of Data Availability: The raw data is shared in an attachment file. The link is available at this link. https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/17khGNLo0hwsWQ13CGl3Ccn9UJN2yVMQr/edit?gid=184189634#gid=184189634

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