

Athlete Identity in Social Media: The Effect of Online Identity Construction on Social Media Addiction and Self-Esteem in University Students

Sosyal Medyada Sporcu Kimliği: Üniversite Öğrencilerinde Çevrimiçi Kimlik İnşasının Sosyal Medya Bağımlılığı ve Öz Saygıya Etkisi

Zuhal ERGÜN¹ 

¹Kastamonu University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Radio, Television and Cinema, Kastamonu, Türkiye



ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the relationship between online identity construction, social media addiction and self-esteem levels of university students who are active in sports. In the study, a quantitative research design was created using descriptive and relational survey model and data were collected from 288 licensed student-athletes studying at the Faculty of Sports Sciences. Data collection tools included Online Identity Construction Scale, Social Media Addiction Scale and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The findings of the study show that there is a significant and positive relationship between online identity construction and social media addiction. This situation reveals that as students construct their athlete identities in online environments, they tend to use social media more. On the other hand, no significant relationship was found between online identity construction and self-esteem. A negative and significant relationship was found between social media addiction and self-esteem, indicating that an increase in social media addiction may decrease self-esteem levels. Regression analysis results show that social media addiction and self-esteem variables explain 18.9% of the total variance in online identity construction. In this process, social media addiction stands out as a stronger predictor. The results reveal that university student athletes' identity construction processes on social media are closely related to their digital interaction levels, but these processes do not have a direct effect on self-esteem.

Keywords: Online identity, social media addiction, self-esteem, athlete identity, university students

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, aktif spor yapan üniversite öğrencilerinin çevrimiçi kimlik inşası, sosyal medya bağımlılığı ve öz saygı düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmada, betimsel ve ilişkisel tarama modeli kullanılarak nicel bir araştırma deseni oluşturulmuş ve veriler, Spor Bilimleri Fakültesi'nde öğrenim gören 288 lisanslı öğrenci-sporcu ile toplanmıştır. Veri toplama araçları arasında Çevrimiçi Kimlik İnşası Ölçeği, Sosyal Medya Bağımlılığı Ölçeği ve Rosenberg Öz Saygı Ölçeği yer almaktadır. Araştırma bulguları, çevrimiçi kimlik inşası ile sosyal medya bağımlılığı arasında anlamlı ve pozitif bir ilişki olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu durum, öğrencilerin çevrimiçi ortamlarda sporcu kimliklerini oluşturdukça sosyal medya kullanımına daha fazla yöneldiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Öte yandan, çevrimiçi kimlik inşası ile öz saygı arasında anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmamıştır. Sosyal medya bağımlılığı ile öz saygı arasında ise negatif ve anlamlı bir ilişki saptanmıştır; bu da sosyal medya bağımlılığındaki artışın öz saygı düzeylerini düşürebileceğini göstermektedir. Regresyon analizi sonuçları, sosyal medya bağımlılığı ve öz saygı değişkenlerinin çevrimiçi kimlik inşasındaki toplam varyansın %18,9'unu açıkladığını göstermektedir. Bu süreçte sosyal medya bağımlılığı daha güçlü bir yordayıcı olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Sonuçlar, üniversite öğrencisi sporcuların sosyal medyada kimlik inşa etme süreçlerinin dijital etkileşim düzeyleriyle yakından ilişkili olduğunu, ancak bu süreçlerin öz saygı üzerinde doğrudan bir etkisi olmadığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çevrimiçi kimlik, sosyal medya bağımlılığı, öz saygı, sporcu kimliği, üniversite öğrencileri

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Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding author:
Zuhal ERGÜN

E-mail: zergun@kastamonu.edu.tr

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Introduction

The concept of identity construction can be defined as a process shaped by social interactions and the assumption of social roles. At this point, social media provides an important ground for individuals to construct their online identities. In particular, young individuals such as university students have the opportunity to introduce themselves to a wider audience and shape their identities through social media (Goffman, 2023). Arnd-Caddigan (2015) emphasizes the online identity construction processes of individuals by addressing how technology changes human relationships. In the social media environment, individuals share content and interact not only to enhance their self-esteem, but also to present themselves as different identities.

Athletes actively use social media platforms to promote themselves, build their brand, and interact with their fans. Similarly, college students develop their "athlete" identities through social media (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Gillespie et al. (2015) discuss the role of media in identity construction, highlighting how social media influences the way young people express themselves in the online world. Sport provides an opportunity to create an attractive online identity, particularly for young people.

Kuss and Griffiths (2017) state that social media use has negative psychological effects on individuals, which are the main consequences of social media addiction. Social media addiction can lead to problems with identity and social relationships, especially among young people. Andreassen (2015) examines social media addiction in the category of behavioral addictions. He says that regular use of social media can have a negative impact on young people's psychological health and academic performance. When combined with students' social media addiction and online identity construction processes, it can affect their personal satisfaction and quality of life, he says.

On the other hand, there is research on the effects of social media use on adolescents' self-esteem. Tiggemann and Slater (2014) reported that images shared on social media can influence how young people see themselves, which can lead to low self-esteem. Fardouly et al. (2015) examined the impact of comparisons made on social media on adolescents' self-esteem. The study found that self-confidence may increase for individuals who create an athlete identity through online posts, but in some cases, negative comparisons may decrease self-esteem. Leary and Tangney (2011) state that the use of social media has a strong impact on an individual's self-esteem. In particular, online posts can lead to significant changes in how individuals feel about themselves. Social media can also influence individuals' personal satisfaction and body image while supporting the process of identity formation. Ellison et al. (2007) examined college students' use of social media and its impact on social capital and community building, defining social media not only as a communication tool for students, but also as a way to develop identity and build social connections.

Athletes define themselves based on environmental and cultural influences; sport is not only about physical ability, but is also linked to an individual's values, social roles, and private life (Brewer, 1993). Athletes' identities, while often focused on achievement and performance, are also influenced by personal values, ethnic identity, gender roles, and other social factors (Burke, 2003). This formation is shaped by social identities as well as individuality; athletes often express themselves through the team or sport they represent (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Athletes' identities develop through the social groups to which they belong; teams, disciplines, and fan communities can be part of athletes' identities and influence their social role perceptions. In addition, athletes' identities are shaped not only by sport, but also by family membership, student roles, and other social roles. This requires a balance between many identities, and achieving this balance is extremely important for the athlete's self-esteem and psychological state (Goffman, 1963, Lally, 2007). When athletic identities become dominant, other identities may be relegated to the background, which can lead to identity conflict and negatively affect athletes' psychological health and self-esteem (Stryker, 1980).

In conclusion, this research aims to provide a multifaceted examination to understand the effects of social media and the psychological and social aspects of athlete identity. It can both contribute to academic studies and provide recommendations to improve the digital health of young people. In particular, studying a specific group, such as athlete university students, will provide a better understanding of this audience. In this framework, answers to the following questions will be sought.

1. How is the online identity construction of athletic university students related to social media addiction?
2. How does online identity construction of athlete university students affect their self-esteem?
3. What is the relationship between social media addiction and self-esteem?

Methods

Research Desing

This study was conducted using descriptive and correlational research design, which are quantitative research techniques. The relational survey model is a model applied to investigate the relationships between variables. In this model, the researcher tries to determine the relationships between certain variables (Büyüköztürk, 2017). The research aims to examine the effects of social media addiction and self-esteem on the online identity formation processes of athlete university students. In the study, a correlational method was used to test the relationships between online identity formation, social media addiction and self-esteem.

Research Publication Ethics

Ethics committee approval for this study was obtained from Kastamonu University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Date: March 03, 2025, Decision No: 10, Meeting No: 4). In addition, verbal consent was obtained from the participants who participated in the study.

Research Group

The population of our study consists of university students in Turkey, adults between the ages of 18-27 who actively use various social media platforms, are in the undergraduate stages of their education life and are licensed athletes in a sports club. Purposive sampling method was used for sample selection. Since this method is a technique that aims to obtain in-depth data by selecting individuals with certain characteristics, it is compatible with the purpose of the study. The individuals to be included in the study group were selected among licensed student athletes between the ages of 18-27 who have experience in social media use and have the cognitive competence to answer the survey questions. In this context, a face-to-face questionnaire was applied to a total of 288 students, 108 female and 180 male, who were studying at the Faculty of Sports Sciences of the relevant University and had the characteristics of the purposive sampling method. Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample group.

Table 1.
Distribution of sample group

		n	%
Gender	Female	108	28.5
	Male	180	71.5
Age	Ages 18 and under	15	5.2
	Ages 19 – 21	120	41.7
	Ages 22 – 24	121	42.0
	Age 25 and above	32	11.1
Being a Licensed Athlete	Yes	197	68.4
	No	91	31.6
Being a National Athlete	Yes	52	18.1
	No	236	81.9
Time Spent on Social Media / Day	0-1 hour	12	4.2
	1-2 hours	49	17.0
	2-3 hours	100	34.7
	3-4 hours	59	20.5
	4 hours and over	68	23.6
Total		288	100.0

Data Collection Tools

To obtain data in the study, the “Identity Construction Scale in Social Media”, “Social Media Addiction Scale” and “Self-Esteem Scale” were applied.

Identity Construction Scale in Social Media:

It was developed by Ökten (2024) to understand and measure the effects of social media use on the identity construction processes of university students. The scale consists of 19 items and three separate factors (content-focused interaction, privacy and security, personal development and self-expression) and is a 5-point Likert type. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was calculated as .84, indicating a strong relationship between the items of the scale.

Social Media Addiction Scale:

Developed by Şahin and Yağcı (2017) to determine social media addiction in adults, the Social Media Addiction Scale consists of 2 sub-dimensions (virtual tolerance and virtual communication) and 20 items. Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient was .89 for the overall scale; .88 for virtual tolerance and .86 for virtual communication. Analyses revealed that the SMAS-A is a valid and reliable scale for determining social media addiction in adults.

Self-Esteem Scale Rosenberg:

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which assesses individuals' attitudes toward themselves, was developed by Rosenberg in 1965 as a 10-item, single-dimensional scale. The Turkish adaptation of the scale was made by Çuhadaroglu (1985). It consists of items evaluated on a 4-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The test-retest reliability coefficients for the original scale were found to be .85 and .88. In our study, the Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient was calculated as .79. The results show that the scale is a reliable tool.

Validity and Reliability

Table 2.
Reliability coefficients of the scale used

	α	Number of Items
Online Identity Construction Scale	.84	19
Social Media Addiction Scale	.89	20
Self-Esteem Scale	.79	10

There are different classifications in the literature for the interpretation of Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The classification of the widely accepted approach belongs to George and Mallery (2019). In this context, it can be said that the reliability of the study is good in line with the values in Table 2.

Data Analysis

Twelve of the physically prepared questionnaires were found to have missing data and therefore these questionnaires were removed. Thus, 388 data were obtained to be analyzed. Normality and homogeneity tests were performed for extreme values. In the last stage, normality values were examined and it was determined that the data set exhibited a normal and homogeneous distribution without the need for transformation. Descriptive statistics were used for variables such as gender, age, whether the participants were licensed athletes or not and the time spent on social media. Differences between groups were tested according to demographic factors such as gender and age. The connections between online identity formation, social media addiction and self-esteem were investigated with Pearson correlation analysis. Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the effects of online identity formation and social media addiction on self-esteem.

Results

Table 3.
Descriptive analyses of the scales

Variables	Number of items	$\bar{x}$	Ss.	Skewness	Kurtosis
ICSSM	19	2.77	.766	.358	.590
SMA	20	2.72	.682	.205	.719
SES	10	2.18	.423	-.537	1.132

ICSSM: Identity Construction Scale in Social Media, SMAS: *Social Media Addiction Scale*, SES: *Self-Esteem Scale*

When the skewness and kurtosis values of the variables in Table 3 are examined, it can be said that all variables are close to a normal distribution. When the skewness and kurtosis values of Identity Construction Scale (ICS), Social Media Addiction (SMA) and Self-Esteem (SE) variables are between -1.5 and +1.5, the data are considered to be in accordance with the normal distribution (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Table 4.
Correlation analysis of the scales

Variables	Social Media Identity Construction	Social Media Addiction	Self-Esteem
Social Media Identity Construction	1		
n	288		
	.419**	1	
Social Media Addiction	.000		
n	288	288	
	.065	-.317**	1
Self-Esteem	.270	.000	
n	288	288	288

**Correlation is significant at the $p < .01$

Also Table 4 shows the correlation analysis of the scales. A strong positive relationship ($r = .419$, $p < .01$) was found between Online Identity Construction and Social Media Addiction. This shows that as online identity construction increases in athletes, social media addiction also increases. On the other hand, no significant correlation was found between Online Identity Construction and Self-Esteem ($r = -0.065$, $p > .01$). Another finding we obtained in our study is a negative relationship between Social Media Addiction and Self-Esteem ($r = -.317$, $p < .01$). This shows that as social media addiction increases in athletes, self-esteem decreases.

Table 5.***Prediction levels of the variables on the level of online identity construction and B and beta correlation coefficients***

<i>R</i>	<i>R2</i>		<i>Adjusted R2</i>	<i>Pred. Std. Error</i>	
.434	.189		.183	.693	
<i>Predictors</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Costant)	.988	.287		3.446	.001
SMA	.486	.060	.433	8.051	.000
SE	.210	.097	.116	2.156	.032

SMA: Social Media Addiction, SE: Self-Esteem

When Table 5 is examined, it is seen that the Multiple Correlation Coefficient is $R=.434$ and the variance explained is $R^2=.189$ between the dependent variable of online identity construction and the predictor variables of social media addiction and self-esteem by applying linear multiple regression. Therefore, it is concluded that these two variables explain 18.9% of the total variance of online identity construction. On the other hand, when the standardized β coefficients are examined, it is seen that social media addiction has the greatest effect with .43.

Discussion

This study examines the relationship between online identity creation processes of university athletes and their social media addiction and self-esteem levels. The following findings were obtained within the framework of the research. First, it has been shown that online identity creation has a positive relationship with social media addiction. This situation reveals that social media platforms change the way people express themselves, and that creating an online identity can trigger addictive behaviors, especially in individuals under visibility pressure, such as athletes. Indeed, people try to appear in their best form on social media platforms, aiming to gain likes, approval and followers; this leads to the emergence of addiction symptoms such as frequent use, overreaction to notifications and withdrawal from real life (Balci & Tecimer, 2023; Hawi & Samaha, 2016). Athletes frequently share content about their achievements, physical appearance, and lifestyle on social media platforms, which increases social comparisons on performance and body image. This has a negative impact on self-esteem and reinforces addictive behaviors by creating a constant need for updates (Lin et al., 2025). This result is in line with Kuss and Griffiths' (2017) findings that social media addiction increases people's interactions in the digital space. It also shows that social media offers users a digital showcase and that they actively construct their online identities with the desire to be more visible on this platform (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). For young athletes in particular, social media is not only a place to showcase their success in competitions, but also functions as an "identity stage" (Goffman, 1959). While individuals create their identities through social feedback such as being watched, liked, and approved on these platforms, this can also increase social media addiction (Andreassen, 2015). When athletes share their successes and emphasize their athletic identities on social media, this process accelerates and can also lead to a deeper relationship with social media.

On the other hand, no significant relationship was found between online identity construction and self-esteem. This suggests that the process of online identity construction does not always affect individuals' self-perceptions positively or negatively. Identity construction may be linked to social approval and digital status rather than self-esteem. Especially on social media platforms, when there is a discrepancy between the identity presented by the individual and the inner self, this may lead to psychological ruptures and a tension between the "real self" and the "ideal self" (Higgins, 1987; Michikyan, et al., 2014). In addition, Goffman's (2023) theory of "presentation of self in daily life" is quite remarkable: Individuals can exhibit various faces by assuming different roles in different social environments. These roles may be shaped by the search for social approval and admiration rather than the inner self. Thus, gaps may occur between self-esteem and identity construction.

Another important finding is that there is a negative relationship between social media addiction and self-esteem. This supports the findings of Tiggemann and Slater (2014) and Fardouly et al. (2015), who suggest that social media use can lead to negative social comparisons in individuals, resulting in low self-esteem. This result can be considered in terms of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Social media users are exposed to images of other people's "ideal life" and this can cause individuals to develop a negative perception of themselves. In particular, an identity focused on success and aesthetics, such as an athletic identity, can become more sensitive to social comparisons. Fardouly et al. (2015) also point out that comparisons made on social media can have negative effects on body perception and self-esteem. In addition, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) stated that social media interactions have the potential to have both positive and negative effects on young people's self-esteem, but this effect depends on factors such as individual differences and purposes of use.

In the regression analysis conducted at the end of the study, it is seen that the effect of social media addiction on online identity formation emerges more clearly. This result shows that people's relationships with social media affect how they develop their digital identities. In particular, the fact that socially valuable and achievement-based identities such as athlete identity become more visible in the digital environment increases individuals' interest in these platforms (Ellison et al., 2007; Burke, 2003).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study showed that the way university students create their online identities is closely linked to their addiction to social media, but that this process does not directly affect self-esteem. Conversely, that excessive use of social media has a negative impact on one's self-esteem. These findings explain the complex link between the construction of digital identity and the psychological well-being of individuals in the social media space.

The research data indicate the importance of awareness-raising studies on social media addiction. The impact of social pressures felt by young athletes on digital platforms on their self-esteem should be taken into consideration and support should be provided for digital media literacy education. It is recommended that similar studies be conducted in different universities and disciplines in order to increase the generalizability of the results. Online identity formation can be analyzed in more depth through qualitative research. In addition, the effects of different social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok on identity formation should be examined separately. Finally, it is of great importance to develop counseling services and widely implement social media literacy education for the psychological well-being of student athletes in situations of body perception, social comparisons and success pressure.

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