WISHFUL THINKING OR WORTHWHILE INSPIRATION? THE IMPACT OF CELEBRITY ROLE MODELS ON UNDERGRADUATES' CAREER ENGAGEMENT[1]

HEVESLİ DÜŞÜNCE Mİ, DEĞERLİ İLHAM MI? LİSANS ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN KARİYER BAĞLILIĞINDA ÜNLÜ ROL MODELLERİN ROLÜ

Berivan TATAR
Gebze Teknik Üniversitesi,
İşletme Fakültesi
btatar@gtu.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0002-0934-3734

Zeynep KARADENİZ CISDIK
Gebze Teknik Üniversitesi,
İşletme Fakültesi
zkcisdik@gtu.edu.tr
ORCID: 0009-0008-5727-9969

Oya ERDİL
Gebze Teknik Üniversitesi,
İşletme Fakültesi
erdil@gtu.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0003-3793-001X

ABSTRACT

With the proliferation of information and communication technologies, people can access celebrities' personal and professional lives. Hence, as powerful agents, celebrities have shaped the values, attitudes, and behaviors of society across various domains of life. However, little is known about the role of celebrities' professional lives in the career development of their followers within the career psychology literature. Against this background, this research aims to investigate the link between celebrity role model influence, wishful identification, and career engagement. The study is based on a sample of 380 undergraduate students, and data were analyzed via AMOS 21.0 and SPSS PROCESS Macro. The current study found that 61.84% of the participants selected celebrities of the same gender as their role models. In terms of nationality, 57.9% of the respondents adopted Turkish celebrities as role models. Furthermore, the present study empirically showed that (1) wishful identification positively related to celebrity role model influence, (2) celebrity role model influence positively related to career engagement, and (3) celebrity role model influence mediated the link between wishful identification and career engagement.

ÖZ

Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerinin yaygınlaşmasıyla birlikte insanlar, ünlülerin kişisel ve profesyonel yaşamlarına erişme imkânına sahip olmuştur. Dolayısıyla, güçlü figürler olarak ünlüler, çeşitli yaşam alanlarında toplumunun değerlerini, tutumlarını ve davranışlarını şekillendirmektedir. Ancak, kariyer psikolojisi literatürü bağlamında ünlülerin profesyonel yaşamlarının, takipçilerinin kariyer gelişimi üzerindeki rolü hakkında çok az şey bilinmektedir. Bu çerçevede, bu araştırma ünlü rol model etkisi, istekli özdeşleşme ve kariyer adanmışlığı arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, 380 lisans öğrencisinden oluşan bir örnekleme dayanmaktadır ve veriler AMOS 21.0 ve SPSS PROCESS Macro aracılığıyla analiz edilmiştir. Mevcut çalışma, katılımcıların %61,84'ünün rol model olarak kendileriyle aynı cinsiyetten ünlüleri seçtiğini ortaya koymuştur. Uyruk açısından, katılımcıların %57,9'u Türk ünlüleri rol model olarak benimsemektedir. Ayrıca, mevcut çalışma (1) istekli özdeşleşmenin ünlü rol model etkisi ile pozitif ilişkili olduğunu, (2) ünlü rol model etkisinin kariyer adanmışlığı ile pozitif ilişkili olduğunu ve (3) ünlü rol model etkisinin istekli özdeşleşme ile kariyer adanmışlığı arasındaki bağlantıya aracılık ettiğini ampirik olarak göstermiştir.

Introduction

In today's hyper-connected media environment, young people are increasingly influenced by public figures, particularly celebrities and social media influencers. These individuals are more than just entertainers; they serve as moral exemplars who shape public discourse and social behavior (Archer & Robb, 2024).

For emerging adults navigating the uncertainty of academic life and early career planning, celebrities are also regarded as role models who represent symbolic models of achievement, authenticity, and success (Darch et al., 2017; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Their occupational portrayals can position them as powerful career role models, particularly when those portrayals reflect realistic and socially respected professions (Hoffner et al., 2006). Meanwhile, career challenges and shocks have created a crisis in the employment market in recent years. In the contemporary job market, undergraduate students face intense competition and considerable difficulty securing employment aligned with their career aspirations (Sou et al., 2022). To overcome these challenges, students have an increased need for role models in their careers and responsibility for successful, dynamic, and self-directed career management through proactive career behaviors to gain objective and subjective career success (Hirschi et al., 2013). Although several studies have examined the separate effects of celebrity admiration, parasocial relationships, and media influence on youth development (Archer & Robb, 2024; Hoffner et al., 2006; Aley & Levine, 2022), the role of celebrities on career-related outcomes remains underexplored in the career management literature. Additionally, while role models contribute to career success, research on their influence remains nascent and warrants more systematic investigation within the field of career psychology (Gibson, 2004). In this context, the current study proposes an integrated model linking celebrity role model influence, wishful identification, and career engagement.

First, we investigate the impact of wishful identification on the adoption of celebrities as role models in the domain of careers. Specifically, this relationship remains theoretically and empirically ambiguous in the literature. Past studies, particularly drawing on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), have shown that the presence of role models leads to greater adoption of values, attitudes, decisions, and behaviors, and thus to higher wishful identification (Aley & Levine, 2022). On the other hand, scholars have suggested that wishful identification contributes to the adoption of role models by highlighting perceived similarities in their personality traits, career paths, success, and behaviors (Brown & Fraser, 2003; Wenhold & Harrison, 2019). Regarding celebrities as role models, the current study investigates the role of wishful identification in rationalizing their status as role models. Particularly, wishful identification is the desire to emulate or become like an admired figure (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Existing research suggests that wishful identification contributes to psychological wellbeing, including self-worth, life satisfaction, and a sense of purpose (Hirschi et al., 2013; Darch et al., 2017). The current study contributes to the career management literature by examining the impact of students' wishful identification on the adoption of celebrity role models.

We also investigate the impact of celebrity role model influences on career engagement. Specifically, existing studies have shown that role models in careers contribute to various developmental outcomes such as career aspirations, self-worth, psychological well-being, identity development, and motivation (Hoffner et al., 2006; Hirschi et al., 2013; Darch, 2017; Aley & Levine, 2022; Archer & Robb, 2024). However, studies investigating the impact of celebrity role models on career engagement are limited in the career management literature.

Finally, we examine the mediating role of celebrity role model influence in the relationship between wishful identification and career engagement. While some studies have investigated the mediating role of television characters' occupational portrayals (Hoffner et al., 2006), parasocial involvement and attachment to media figures (Giles & Maltby, 2004), perceived similarity (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), and motivational salience of social media influencers (Archer & Robb, 2024) in the relationship between wishful identification and career engagement, there are few studies examining underlying mechanisms within the context of celebrity role model influence. Besides, the mediating role of celebrity role model influence in the link between wishful identification and career engagement remains relatively unexplored in literature.

Therefore, the present study investigates (1) the role of wishful identification in influencing celebrity role model influence, (2) the effect of celebrity role model influence on career engagement, and (3) the mediating role of celebrity role model influence in the relationship between wishful identification and career engagement. The following section reviews previous research on celebrity role models to clarify the theoretical basis of this study.

Role Model in Career and Celebrity Role Model

Role models serve as essential agents in shaping individuals' career aspirations, values, and psychological development (Cottle et. al., 2024; Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004). Traditionally, role models include family members, educators, and professionals who offer direct guidance and behavioral templates (Hackett et al., 1989). In educational settings, non-career staff and faculty have increasingly been recognized as career influencers, shaping students' development through informal mentoring, advising, and storytelling (Stebleton & Ho, 2023).

According to social learning theory, individuals learn by observing the actions of others, including those around them, to understand social norms and societal expectations (Bandura, 1986, 2001). Hence, role models are defined as individuals deemed worthy of emulation (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004), or those whose behaviors, styles, and attributes are imitated, thereby influencing others' lives (Cross et al., 2017), inspiring them toward goals (Cottle et. al., 2024) or serving as examples of how to –or how not to– behave (Archer & Robb, 2024; Cross et. al., 2017). There is a relationship between role model influences and various outcomes, such as career salience, educational aspirations, and college major choices (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004; Hackett et. al., 1989). Beyond careers, role models are generally regarded as important for the well-being and development of young peopleas they provide positive role models, encourage the acquisition of new skills, and stimulate goal adoption (Cottle et al., 2024). Positive role models and mentors, in particular, can enhance psychological well-being by improving psychological safety and self-confidence (Cottle et. al., 2024). Conversely, observing behavior perceived negatively can lead individuals to reject such behaviors, and may contribute to negative self-perceptions of their future (Cross et al., 2017).

These influences are embedded within the broader framework of Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS), a process through which individuals internalize career-related messages before entering the workforce (Aley & Levine, 2022; Aley & Levine, 2023; Levine & Aley, 2022). This process involves various sources of influence, including parents, schools, peers, part-time jobs, and media; however, recent scholarship has identified the internet as a distinct sixth source (Aley & Levine, 2022; Levine & Aley, 2021). As a VAS source, the internet is now the most frequently used medium for obtaining career-related information, enabling individuals to seek specific and up-to-date details about careers actively, required qualifications, and industry standards often offering more realistic previews than traditional sources (Aley & Levine, 2022; Levine & Aley, 2022). On the other hand, from the media aspect of vocational anticipatory socialization, both traditional and online media figures, such as celebrities and influencers, can significantly influence career development through psychological processes like wishful identification (Aley & Levine, 2022; Hoffner et al., 2006; Wenhold & Harrison, 2019) and parasocial relationships (Aley & Levine, 2022; Tukachinsky Forster, 2023). These processes may be amplified by the perceived realism and interactivity of online platforms (Aley & Levine, 2022; Tukachinsky & Forster, 2023; Wenhold & Harrison, 2019).

More recently, celebrities and social media influencers have emerged as salient career role models, particularly among Gen Z students. Archer and Robb (2024) argue that due to their curated authenticity and public exposure, influencers are increasingly viewed as figures with moral and aspirational weight, often imitated or followed with emotional investment. Unlike traditional role models, celebrity figures influence through parasocial relationships; one-sided, yet emotionally significant connections that resemble mentorship (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Finally, the internet now functions a sixth, distinct VAS source beyond traditional media, providing self-directed access to career-relevant content, mentorship, and identity modeling (Levine & Aley, 2022). Students actively seek career advice, role-model narratives, and motivational narratives through platforms such as YouTube and LinkedIn, reinforcing the importance of digital celebrity figures in shaping both career thinking and emotional well-being.

The formation of celebrity role models is influenced by a range of factors related to both the media figure and the audience. Celebrities and social media influencers function as role models largely based on public awareness and admiration (Archer & Robb, 2024), and perceived success (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004). Specific character attributes (i.e., perceived intelligence, attractiveness, popularity) (Aley & Levine, 2022; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Wenhold & Harrison, 2019) also affect the adoption of role models. From the audience perspective,

perceived similarity (i.e., gender, race, social standing, values, beliefs, or experiences)(Aley & Levine, 2022; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004), wishful identification (Aley & Levine, 2022; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Hoffner et al., 2006; Lim et. al., 2020), and parasocial relationships (Aley & Levine, 2022; Lim et al., 2020) are central to adopting a role model.

Regarding the consequences of adopting celebrities as role models, existing research suggests that when celebrity role models influence young people's career aspirations, identity formation, and psychological well-being (Aley & Levine, 2022; Archer & Robb, 2024), they also impact career planning and self-concept among adolescents with underrepresented backgrounds (Hoffner et al., 2006). Similarly, celebrities who publicly discuss their struggles, motivations, and professional journeys can enhance self-worth, motivation, and purpose in their followers (Hirschi et al., 2013; Darch et al., 2017).

From these broad psychological effects, we recognize the need to examine more closely how these processes manifest in university students' proactive career behaviors. Theoretically grounded in social learning and vocational anticipatory socialization, this study presents an integrated model. This concept proposes that wishful identification precedes the adoption of celebrity role models and subsequently enhances career engagement. The following specific hypotheses have been developed to test these relationships.

Hypotheses Development

Wishful Identification and Celebrity Role Model Influence

We argue that wishful identification is positively associated with the adoption of celebrity role models in a career, mediated by perceptions of similarities in their personality traits, career paths, success, and behaviors. Specifically, wishful identification is "a psychological process through which an individual desires or attempts to become like another person, such as a media character" (Hoffner et al., 2008, p. 286). Based on the Celebrity Influence Model, parasocial relationships with celebrity trigger identification, and identification leads to adoption of the celebrity's beliefs and behaviors as a role model (Brown & Fraser, 2003). Consequently, Wenhold and Harrison (2019) found that emerging adult women adopt female TV news personalities as career role models, reflecting greater wishful identification. Based on this argument, individuals who identify themselves more strongly with celebrities because of similarities in values, attitudes, decisions, and behaviors may be more likely to adopt them as role models in their careers. Hence, we proposed that:

H1: Wishful identification positively relates to celebrity role model influence.

Celebrity Role Model Influence and Career Engagement

We suggest that a celebrity role model is positively associated with career engagement by enhancing inspiration, self-confidence, and career-related support. Specifically, role models' perceived competence, similarity, and attainability of success enhance students' self-efficacy and career-related performance (Tal et al. 2024). Additionally, role models boost motivation for existing goals and stimulate new goal-setting by subjectively demonstrating the attainability of success, thereby leading to high occupational aspirations and career-related decision-making (Böhle et al., 2025). Additionally, role models facilitate the development of coping mechanisms for career-related challenges, stress, and future career anxiety by providing a variety of information, experience, advice, and encouragement (Cottle et al., 2024). The presence of role models reduces career-related stress, increases self-confidence, facilitates social networking, and provides psychological safety (Darch et al., 2017). In this regard, the presence of role models is associated with higher engagement (Valero et al., 2019). Regarding celebrities, Aley and Levine (2022) indicated that wishful identification with celebrities significantly predicted participants' work ethic and career aspirations. Andreeva et al. (2024) found that social media role models (like influencers or "outstanding others") can influence inspiration shaped by perceived source similarity, and indirectly by dispositional optimism through perceived goal attainability. Based on these arguments, we proposed that students who adopt celebrities as role models are more engaged in their careers by planning their careers, exploring career environments, networking with others, and developing their personal and professional skills. Hence:
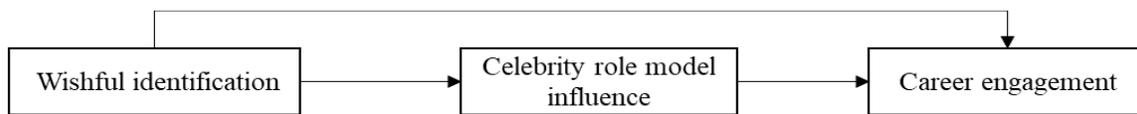
H2: Celebrity role model influence positively relates to career engagement.

Mediating Role of Celebrity Role Model Influence on the Relationship between Wishful Identification and Career Engagement

Wishful identification also impacts career engagement by eliciting higher motivation for developing career behaviors. Specifically, people with high wishful identification with specific characters tend to adapt their attitudes, values, and behaviors to achieve rewards or desired outcomes, including forming connections, maximizing their potential, or improving self-esteem (Hoffner et al., 2006). Parasocial bonds and wishful identification can serve compensatory emotional functions, especially for adolescents and emerging adults facing uncertainty or social disconnection (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Regarding celebrities, Aley and Levine (2022) found that wishful identification with a celebrity role model in career choice leads to higher career aspirations. Hence, wishful identification with a celebrity role model enhances motivation to achieve these outcomes and, in turn, leads to higher career engagement by proactively developing diverse career behaviors (Hirschi et al., 2014).

Additionally, the presence of role models enhances career engagement (Valero et al., 2019). In this context, we propose that adopting a celebrity role model mediates the link between wishful identification and career engagement. In particular, similarities in personality traits, career paths, success, and behaviors contribute to the development of wishful identification and thereby facilitate the adoption of celebrities as role models. These role models provide a variety of career-related information, experience, advice, and encouragement, and facilitate the development of coping mechanisms for career-related challenges, stress, and future career anxiety, resulting in higher career engagement (Cottle et al., 2024). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3: Celebrity role model influence mediates the link between wishful identification and career engagement.

Figure 1. Research Model

In sum, the current study investigates (1) the role of wishful identification on celebrity role model influence, (2) the effect of celebrity role model influence on career engagement, and (3) the mediating role of celebrity role model influence in the relationship between wishful identification and career engagement. The following section details the sample, data collection procedures, and measurement instruments used in the study.

Research Method

Participants and Procedure

The study used a convenience sampling strategy. Participants who were (i) actively studying in any undergraduate programs and (ii) adopting any celebrities as role models in their careers were included in the study sample. To test the research hypotheses, an online survey method was conducted using an online survey platform (surveey.com) to gather the data. Therefore, the survey link was distributed to undergraduate students from a variety of undergraduate programs. IP addresses and demographic information were checked for each response to ensure that only one response was submitted per person. 20 inappropriate or careless responses having been eliminated (e.g., inconsistent answers in pairs of similar questions, extremely fast completion times), 380 participants were included in the current study. Regarding the sample profile, 56.3% were female. The average age of the participants was 19.5 years. Regarding majors, respondents reported studying molecular biology and genetics (9.2%), mathematics (8.4%), chemistry (7.9%), and other fields (civil engineering, mechanical engineering, physics, business administration).

Respondents adopted celebrities including Aziz Sancar (12.1%), Elon Musk (8.2%), Marie Curie (7.4%), Selçuk Bayraktar (8.2%), Canan Dağdeviren (3.5%), and Zaha Hadid (2.6%) as role models in their careers. On the other hand, regarding the gender of the celebrity role models adopted by the participants, 23.2% of the role models are female while 76.8% are male. Furthermore, 61.84% of participants selected same-gender celebrities

as their role models. In terms of nationality, 57.9% of the respondents adopted Turkish celebrities as their role models. Participants have been following the celebrities they adopt as role models in their careers for an average of 4 years. They prefer Twitter, Instagram, TV programs, LinkedIn, Spotify, and YouTube as follow-up channels.

Measures

The hypotheses were investigated using multi-item scales from previous studies. The measurement items were translated from English into Turkish following the back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). All measurement items were responded to on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5).

Celebrity Role Model Influence was measured by a 5-item scale developed by Rich (1997) to assess perception of role modeling. The current study adapted this scale so as to measure celebrity role model influence. Sample items are "This celebrity role model provides a good model for me to follow" and "This celebrity role model sets a positive example for others to follow."

Wishful identification was measured using a 5-item scale developed by Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) to assess undergraduate students' desire to emulate a celebrity role model in their careers. Sample items are "He/she is the sort of person I want to be like myself" and "Sometimes I wish I could be more like him/her."

Career engagement was measured by a 9-item scale developed by Hirschi, Freund, and Herrmann (2013) to investigate undergraduate students' proactive development of their careers through diverse career behaviors. Sample items are "Developed plans and goals for my future career" and "Sincerely thought about personal values, interests, abilities, and weaknesses."

Following data collection, the proposed hypotheses were tested using AMOS 21.0 and SPSS PROCESS Macro. The results of these analyses are presented in the next section.

Findings

Construct Validity and Reliability

The reliability and validity of measures were assessed through confirmatory factor analysis. After eliminating the problematic items using a step-by-step procedure (2 items from wishful identification and two items from career engagement), the model adequately fit the data ($\chi^2_{(85)}$ = 224.00, p < .001, CFI = .93, TLI = .91, IFI=.93, RMSEA = .07). Table 1 shows the results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Constructs	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha
Celebrity Role Model Influence		.82	.49	.82
CRM1	.72			
CRM2	.82			
CRM3	.57			
CRM4	.71			
CRM5	.65			
Wishful Identification		.77	.53	.77
WID1	.73			
WID2	.78			
WID3	.68			
Career Engagement		.84	.76	.80
Planning and Evaluation		.80	.50	.80
CEN1	.79			
CEN2	.68			
CEN3	.64			
CEN4	.70			
Research and Networking		.75	.51	.74
CEN7	.55			

CEN8		.81	
CEN9		.76	

As seen in Table 1, the factor loadings of each variable were all above .50 (Hair et al., 2010). Besides, Average Variances Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and Cronbach's alpha values were well beyond the cutoff value (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), supporting convergent validity. Table 2 displays correlations among all variables.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

Variables		1	2	3
Wishful Identification	1	(.73)		
Celebrity Role Model Influence	2	.51**	(.71)	
Career engagement	3	.11*	.16**	(.87)
Mean		4.45	4.51	4.36
S. dev.		.43	.40	.37

Note. ** p< .01; * p< .05; Values along the diagonal are the square root of AVE.

According to Table 2, wishful identification was positively related to celebrity role model influence (r= .51, p<.01) and career engagement (r= .11, p<.05). Additionally, celebrity role model influence was positively related to career engagement (r= .16, p<.01). On the other hand, the squared root of AVE for each construct was greater than the correlations between the constructs, suggesting discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Common Method Variance Assessment

Common method variance was assessed through Harman's single-factor (Podsakoff et al., 2003) and common latent factor (CLF) analysis (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Results from Harman's single-factor analysis indicated that the total variance is 63.7%, and the first factor accounts for 27.7% of the total variance, which exceeds the threshold (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In terms of common latent factor (CLF) analysis, results showed that adding a common latent factor did not result in a significant change in model fit indices, model without a CLF (($\chi^2_{(85)}$ = 224.00, p < .001, CFI = .93, TLI = .91, IFI=.93, RMSEA = .07) and with a CLF (($\chi^2_{(84)}$ = 218.55, p < .001, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, IFI=.93, RMSEA = .07), which is well beyond the threshold levels difference of fit indices for model with and without a CLF (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Also, the differences between the path coefficients were less than 0.20. Therefore, common method variance was not an issue in the current study.

Hypothesis Testing

The aforementioned hypotheses were tested via SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) using 5000 bootstraps resamples, and 95% confidence intervals. Table 3 indicates the results of mediating analysis.

Table 3. Results of Mediating Analysis

		95% CI	
	β	LL	UL
Direct effects			
Wishful identification → Celebrity role model influence (a)	.47***	.39	.55
Celebrity role model influence→ Career engagement (b)	.15**	.06	.24
Wishful identification → Career engagement (c)	.10*	.01	.19
Wishful identification → Career engagement (c')	.04	-.06	.14
Indirect effect			
Wishful identification → Celebrity role model influence → Career engagement	.06*	.01	.12

Note. * p< .05, ** p< .01, *** p< .001, CI=Confidence interval LL=Lower limit UL=Upper limit

The results in Table 3 showed that wishful identification was positively related to celebrity role model influence (β=.47, p<.001; 95% CI [.39, .55]), thereby supporting H1. Also, celebrity role model influence was positively related to career engagement (β=.15, p<.01; 95% CI [.06, .24]), thus supporting H2. Wishful identification was also positively related to career engagement (β=.10, p<.05; 95% CI [.01, .19]).

In terms of testing the mediating role of celebrity role model influence, we used Model 4 within the PROCESS macro. In this regard, celebrity role model influence mediated the link between wishful identification and career engagement (β=.11, p<.001; 95% CI [.05, .19]), which excluded zero. Also, the effect of wishful identification on career engagement became non-significant (β=.05 p> .05; 95% CI [-.06, .14]). Based on these results, celebrity role model influence fully mediates the relationship between wishful identification and career engagement, supporting H3. Finally, all proposed hypotheses were empirically supported in the current study. The theoretical and practical implications were discussed in the next section in relation to the existing literature.

Conclusion

This study deepens our understanding of celebrities as role models for undergraduate students' careers, given the link between celebrity role-model influence, wishful identification, and career engagement.

First, this study demonstrated that wishful identification positively relates to celebrity role model influence in career, expanding the existing literature. In particular, prior studies have focused on the impact of role models on wishful identification (Aley & Levine, 2022). On the other hand, limited studies have shown that people who wishfully identify themselves with professionals tend to adopt them as role models (Brown & Fraser, 2003; Wenhold & Harrison, 2019). Also, prior studies have shown the impact of wishful identification on emotional engagement (Lim, Choe, Zhang, & Noh, 2020), parasocial relationships (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), and psychological well-being (Hirschi et al., 2013; Darch et al., 2017), parasocial interaction (Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012), and occupational aspirations via fictional characters (Hoffner et al., 2006). The current study leveraged an understanding of the role of wishful identification with celebrities by examining similarities in personality, career values and decisions, attitudes, and career behaviors in adopting these celebrities as role models for career choice.

Second, this study showed that celebrity role model influence is positively related to career engagement. Previous studies revealed that role models improve career aspirations, self-worth, psychological well-being, identity development, future career aspirations and work ethic, inspiration, and motivation (Hoffner et al., 2006; Hirschi et al., 2013; Darch, 2017; Aley & Levine, 2022; Archer & Robb, 2024; Kim & Chung, 2024). Besides, role models lead to higher self-efficacy and career-related performance (Tal et al., 2024), and occupational aspirations (Böhle et al., 2025). Here, the current study expanded the career psychology literature by investigating celebrities as role models and showed that celebrity role model influence enhances career engagement. Therefore, celebrities provide concrete examples and guidance on the attainability of career-related goals, thereby increasing career success and boosting students' proactive career behaviors in general, and career engagement in particular.

This study also revealed that the influence of celebrity role models mediates the link between wishful identification and career engagement, extending prior literature. Prior studies showed that wishful identification contributes to the adoption of celebrities as role models in their careers (Brown & Fraser, 2003; Wenhold & Harrison, 2019). Even in contexts where students face significant career barriers such as financial insecurity, limited networks, or low confidence, wishful identification and belief in digital role models may foster emotional resilience and self-belief (Levine & Aley, 2021), and hence, improve career engagement by proactively planning their careers, exploring career environments, networking with other people, developing their personal and professional skills. Here, the current study confirmed that the influence of celebrity role models mediates the link between wishful identification and career engagement.

Regarding theoretical implications, the results of this study support the Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS) model, which posits that the internet is a primary source of career information. Unlike the traditional models describing family, schools, peers, part-time jobs, and traditional media as the primary VAS sources, recent research describes the internet as the sixth VAS source, which enables emerging adults to be active seekers of career-related information, as opposed to being passive receivers of it (Levine & Aley, 2022). Accordingly, establishing celebrities as role models through digital platforms is not only a form of entertainment, but also a

functional instrument for career engagement, which is a key theoretical implication of the current study. In addition, by validating the efficacy of "symbolic modeling" (Bandura, 2001), the present study extends Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986) to the context of digital career engagement. The research also confirms that observing media figures can facilitate career-related decisions (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004), particularly when the desire to imitate parasocial role models is triggered by wishful identification (Aley & Levine, 2022). Therefore, we conclude that students learn important career behaviors from digital celebrity role models with whom they wishfully identify themselves with celebrity role models. Moreover, the results align with those of Lim et al. (2020), who demonstrated that wishful identification does not directly dictate behavioral loyalty but operates through the mediation of parasocial relationships. Drawing an analogy to this mechanism, the present study identifies celebrity role model influence as the parallel functional mediator in the career context. Just as Lim et al. (2020) found that parasocial relationships transform identification into loyalty, this research confirms that role-model influence is the mechanism that transforms wishful identification into active career engagement. This indicates that theoretical models of career development should account for these mediating experiences to transform admiration into active career engagement.

The beneficial effects of celebrity role models identified in this study offer practical implications for administrators and policymakers in higher education institutions. Given that students actively seek career information from digital sources and celebrities (Aley & Levine, 2022; Levine & Aley, 2022), university administrators and career center managers should integrate digital literacy and celebrity narratives into their programs. Career counselors may use these parasocial relationships as a starting point to engage students, rather than treating celebrity admiration as a distraction. For example, integration of micro narratives or case studies of celebrities' career paths, specifically their resilience against failures, into the curriculum can normalize career challenges and improve students' preparedness (Stebleton & Ho, 2023). As a result, developing a curriculum that incorporates narratives and case studies of celebrity role models will foster students' career engagement. Moreover, administrators in higher education can utilize the concept of career influencers by training faculty and staff to acknowledge their role in guiding students. As a result, they can expand the universities' support network beyond the traditional career center (Stebleton & Ho, 2023). Consistently, the study implies that raising faculty and staff awareness of the influence of celebrity role models on career engagement will contribute to student development and encourage positive career-support practices. Administrators should also consider designing mentorship programs that ensure a diversity of role models. Through these programs, students can identify figures from diverse backgrounds with whom they can wishfully identify (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004). Finally, university marketing departments may work with students who want to be influencers themselves. It is advisable to treat them as brand ambassadors, thereby supporting institutional objectives while validating their career interests (Rolle, 2024). Ultimately, this collaborative approach transforms social media from a perceived distraction into a legitimate platform for career development, thereby actively fostering students' career engagement by aligning their digital habits with their professional aspirations.

Limitations and Further Research

The current study presents significant findings, but also has certain limitations. First, we collected self-reported data, which may be subject to common method bias. We tried to minimize this by means of different methods including instructed response items and reverse-scoring; however, the problem may still persist. We also conducted a cross-sectional survey, limiting the investigation of changes in the variables. Future research may use a longitudinal design to assess the impact of celebrity role model influence in different career stages over time. Furthermore, we only used data from Turkish students, limiting generalizability. In future studies, researchers should investigate the role of celebrity role models across different cultural contexts. On the other hand, the influence of celebrity role models was treated as a unidimensional variable in the current study. Future research can assess the influence of celebrity role models across a range of celebrity characteristics (e.g., expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness). The present study also primarily investigated celebrities as actors in vocational anticipatory socialization. Investigating the other sources including family, schools, and peerswould be beneficial for future research.

Besides, this study focused on wishful identification as a consequence of the existence of a celebrity role model. Future studies may investigate the impact of a celebrity role model influence on students' psychological capital,

vocational identity, proactive career behaviors, and career adaptability. Moreover, the current study focused on the role of wishful identification via a celebrity role model in career engagement. Researchers can investigate how meaning in life, life satisfaction, and career-related self-efficacy are the consequences of wishful identification. Last but not least, although this study focused on positive outcomes, future research should also explore the potential adverse effects of role modelling. Research shows that when individuals observe senior figures struggling with work-life balance and engaging in unethical behavior, they may develop a prevention focus, thus viewing those seniors' careers as models to avoid (Cross et al., 2017). Examining celebrity role modelling on career avoidance behaviors could help explain how students avoid unwanted career paths.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) did not receive any financial support for the research, writing, and/or publication of this article.

Statements of Publication Ethics

We hereby declare that the study has no unethical issues and that research and publication ethics have been observed carefully.

Researchers' Contribution Rate

The study was conducted and reported with equal collaboration among the researchers.

Ethics Committee Approval Information

Ethics committee approval was obtained for this study from the Gebze Technical University, Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, with its decision dated 26/05/2025 and numbered E-43633178-199-200255.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Günümüzün dijital medya ortamında gençler, başta ünlüler ve sosyal medya fenomenleri olmak üzere gözündeki medya figürlerinden giderek daha fazla etkilenmektedir. Bu kişiler eğlendirici olmanın ötesinde, kamusal söylemi ve sosyal davranışları etkileyen ahlaki örnekler olarak hizmet etmektedir (Archer & Robb, 2024). Akademik hayatın ve erken kariyer planlamasının belirsizliği içinde yol alan yetişkin bireyler için ünlüler, aynı zamanda başarı ve özgünlüğü temsil eden rol modeller olarak kabul edilmektedir (Darch vd., 2017; Hoffner ve Buchanan, 2005). Bu ünlülerin mesleki olarak sahip oldukları kariyer hikayeleri, özellikle gerçekçi ve sosyal olarak saygı duyulan bir kariyer yolculuğunu içermesi, onların güçlü kariyer rol modelleri olarak konumlandırılmasında etkili olmaktadır (Hoffner vd., 2006).

Öte yandan kariyer zorlukları son yıllarda istihdam piyasasında bir kriz yaratmıştır. Günümüz iş gücü piyasasında lisans öğrencileri, şiddetli bir rekabetle karşılaşmış ve kariyer hedeflerine uygun bir iş bulma konusunda zorluklar yaşamışlardır (Sou vd., 2022). Bu zorlukların üstesinden gelmek için öğrenciler, kariyerlerinde rol modellere daha fazla ihtiyaç duymakta ve nesnel ve öznel kariyer başarısı elde etmek için proaktif kariyer davranışları yoluyla başarılı, dinamik ve öz-yönelimli kariyer yönetimi için sorumluluk almaktadır (Hirschi et al., 2013).

Çeşitli çalışmalar ünlü hayranlığı, parasosyal ilişkiler ve medya etkisinin gençlerin gelişimi üzerindeki etkilerini incelemiş olsa da (Archer & Robb, 2024; Hoffner ve diğerleri, 2006; Aley & Levine, 2022) ünlülerin kariyerle ilgili çıktılar üzerindeki rolü kariyer yönetimi literatüründe yeterince araştırılmamıştır. Buna ek olarak, kariyer açısından benimsenen rol modeller kariyer başarısına önemli katkılarda bulunsa da, rol modeller üzerine yapılan araştırmalar henüz başlangıç aşamasındadır ve kariyer psikolojisi literatüründe sistematik bir şekilde incelenmeye değer bir konu olarak yer almaktadır (Gibson, 2004). Bu bağlamda, bu araştırma ünlü rol modeller, istekli özdeşleşme ve kariyer adanmışlığı arasındaki bağlantıyı araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Araştırmanın teorik çerçevesi, bireylerin işgücüne katılmadan önce kariyerle ilgili mesajları içselleştirdiği bir süreç olan Mesleki Beklenti Sosyalleşmesine dayanmaktadır (Aley & Levine, 2022; Aley & Levine, 2023; Levine & Aley, 2022). İşgücüne katılmadan önceki süreç; ebeveynler, okullar, akranlar, yarı zamanlı işler ve medya dahil olmak üzere çeşitli etki kaynaklarını içerir. Son zamanlarda yapılan araştırmalar interneti, altıncı kaynak olarak ortaya koymuştur (Aley ve Levine, 2022; Levine ve Aley, 2021). İnternet bir Mesleki Beklenti Sosyalleşme kaynağı olarak ele alındığında, insanlar artık kariyer süreçleriyle ilgili bilgileri edinmek için sıklıkla interneti kullanmaktadır. İnternet, güncel kariyer yolları, gerekli nitelikler ve endüstri standartları için aktif bir arayış aracı olarak görmektedir (Aley & Levine, 2022; Levine & Aley, 2022). Öte yandan, mesleki beklentisel sosyalleşmenin medya yönünden bakıldığında, ünlüler ve etkileyiciler gibi hem geleneksel hem de çevrimiçi medya figürleri, istekli özdeşleşme (Aley & Levine, 2022; Hoffner et al., 2006; Wenhold & Harrison, 2019) ve parasosyal ilişkiler (Aley & Levine, 2022; Tukachinsky Forster, 2023) gibi psikolojik süreçler yoluyla kariyer gelişimini önemli ölçüde etkilemektedir.

Son zamanlarda, ünlüler ve sosyal medya fenomenleri, özellikle Z kuşağı öğrencileri arasında belirgin kariyer rol modelleri olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Archer ve Robb'a (2024) göre, ünlüler ve sosyal medya fenomenleri, özgünlükleri ve kamuya açık bilgiler sunmaları nedeniyle giderek daha fazla büyük öneme sahip figürler olarak görülmekte, sıklıkla taklit edilmekte veya duygusal olarak takip edilmektedir. Geleneksel rol modellerinden farklı olarak ünlü figürler, parasosyal ilişkiler -tek taraflı ancak duygusal olarak anlamlı, mentorluğa benzeyen bağlantılar- yoluyla bireyleri etkilemektedir (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Son olarak, internet artık geleneksel medyanın ötesinde altıncı, farklı bir VAS kaynağı olarak işlev görmekte ve kariyerle ilgili içeriğe, mentorluğa ve kimlik modellemesine kendi kendine erişim sağlamaktadır (Levine & Aley, 2022). Öğrenciler, YouTube ve LinkedIn gibi platformlar aracılığıyla aktif olarak kariyer tavsiyeleri, rol model hikayeleri ve motivasyon anlatıları aramakta ve ünlü figürlerin hem kariyer düşüncesini hem de duygusal refahı şekillendirmedeki önemini pekiştirmektedir.

Ünlülerin rol model olarak belirlenmesinde önemli olan faktörlerden biri, istekli özdeşleşmedir. İstekli özdeşleşme "bir bireyin bir medya karakteri gibi başka bir kişi gibi olmayı arzuladığı veya buna teşebbüs ettiği psikolojik bir süreç" olarak tanımlanmaktadır (Hoffner vd., 2008, s. 286). İstekli özdeşleşme, ünlü rol modellerinin kişilik özellikleri, kariyer yolları, başarıları ve davranışlarına ilişkin benzerlik algısı yoluyla kariyerde ünlü rol modellerini benimseme ile olumlu yönde ilişkilidir. Ünlü Etkisi Modeline göre, ünlüyle kurulan

parasosyal ilişkiler özdeşleşmeyi tetiklemekte ve özdeşleşme de ünlünün inanç ve davranışlarının bir rol model olarak benimsenmesine yol açmaktadır (Brown ve Fraser, 2003).

Ünlülerin rol model olarak benimsenmesi ise, kariyerde ilham, özgüven ve desteği hissini artırarak kariyer bağlılığını olumlu etkilemektedir. Özellikle yetkinlikleri, benzerlikleri ve başarılarının ulaşılabilirliği ile ilgili olarak rol modelleri, öğrencilerin öz yeterliliklerini ve kariyerle ilgili performanslarını artırmaktadır (Tal vd., 2024). Ayrıca, rol modeller mevcut hedefler için motivasyonu artırmakta ve öznel olarak başarının elde edilebilirliğinin örnekleri olarak yeni hedef belirlemeyi teşvik etmekte ve bu nedenle mesleki hedefler belirlemeye ve kariyerle ilgili karar vermeye yol açmaktadır (Böhle vd., 2025). Bu argümanlara dayanarak, ünlüleri rol model olarak benimseyen öğrencilerin kariyerlerini planlayarak, kariyer ortamlarını keşfederek, diğer insanlarla ağ kurarak, kişisel ve mesleki becerilerini geliştirerek kariyer bağlılıkları daha yüksek olmaktadır.

Bu bağlamda, ünlü bir rol modeli benimsemenin istekli özdeşleşme ve kariyer bağlılığı arasındaki bağlantıya aracılık etmektedir. Özellikle kişilik özellikleri, kariyer yolları, başarı ve davranışlarla ilgili benzerlikler, istekli özdeşleşmenin gelişimine katkıda bulunmakta ve dolayısıyla ünlülerin rol model olarak benimsenmesini kolaylaştırmaktadır. Bu rol modeller, kariyerle ilgili çeşitli bilgi, deneyim, tavsiye ve teşvik sağlayarak kariyerle ilgili zorluklar, stres ve gelecekteki kariyer kaygısı ile baş etme mekanizması geliştirilmesini kolaylaştırmakta (Cottle vd., 2024) ve bunun sonucunda daha yüksek kariyer bağlılığı geliştirilmesine katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Çalışma, 380 lisans öğrencisinden oluşan bir örnekleme dayanmaktadır ve veriler yapısal eşitlik modellemesi yoluyla analiz edilmiştir. Mevcut çalışma, katılımcıların %61,84'ünün rol model olarak kendileriyle aynı cinsiyetten ünlüleri seçtiğini ortaya koymuştur. Uyruk açısından, katılımcıların %57,9'u Türk ünlüleri rol model olarak benimsemektedir. Ayrıca, mevcut çalışma (1) istekli özdeşleşmenin ünlü rol model etkisi ile pozitif ilişkili olduğunu, (2) ünlü rol model etkisinin kariyer adanmışlığı ile pozitif ilişkili olduğunu ve (3) ünlü rol model etkisinin istekli özdeşleşme ile kariyer adanmışlığı arasındaki bağlantıya aracılık ettiğini ampirik olarak göstermiştir.