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The Impact of Media Representation on Female Athlete Identity and Self-Perception



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explores the impact of media representation on female athlete identity and self-perception.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect data. Twenty-four female athletes, aged 18 to 35, from various sports disciplines in Istanbul participated. The interviews, conducted in Turkish, lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was performed using NVivo software, allowing for the identification of key themes and subthemes related to media representation, identity construction, self-perception, and coping mechanisms. The study continued data collection until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Findings: Thematic analysis revealed four main themes: media representation, identity construction, self-perception, and coping mechanisms. Participants reported stereotypical portrayals emphasizing physical appearance and emotional attributes over athletic skills. Media visibility was significantly lower for female athletes compared to their male counterparts, impacting their professional identity and opportunities. The internalization of stereotypes and media-driven body ideals affected their self-esteem and body image, contributing to performance anxiety and mental health challenges. Participants employed various coping mechanisms, including resilience building, support networks, media literacy, advocacy, and personal strategies, to manage the negative impacts of media representation.

Conclusion: Media representation profoundly influences female athletes' identity and self-perception, often reinforcing stereotypes and cultural biases. Equitable media coverage focusing on athletic achievements and personal stories is crucial for fostering positive self-identity among female athletes. Practical steps, including media training, advocacy, and promoting media literacy, are essential to create a more inclusive and supportive media environment.

Keywords: Female athletes, media representation, identity construction, self-perception, Istanbul, coping mechanisms, stereotypes, body image, mental health.

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1. Introduction

The representation of female athletes in media has long been a topic of significant scholarly interest, given its profound impact on societal perceptions, gender norms, and the self-identity of the athletes themselves. Media not only reflects but also shapes public perceptions, often reinforcing stereotypes and cultural biases (1).

Historically, media coverage of sports has been predominantly male-centric, with female athletes receiving disproportionately less attention (2). When female athletes are featured, they are often portrayed in ways that emphasize their physical appearance or traditional gender roles rather than their athletic abilities (3). This pattern of representation has persisted over decades, albeit with some notable changes and improvements in recent years (2).

In their study, Antunovic (2017) highlighted the stereotypical portrayal of sportswomen in Hungary's sports magazine, illustrating how female athletes are often turned into mere objects of aesthetic appreciation rather than being acknowledged for their sporting prowess (3). Similarly, Bowes and Kitching (2019) analyzed print media representations of female professional golfers, finding that when women competed in men's events, their participation was framed in a way that emphasized novelty and gender differences rather than skill and achievement (4).

The way female athletes are represented in the media can significantly influence their personal and professional identities. Media portrayals that emphasize physical appearance or conform to traditional gender stereotypes can lead to internalization of these stereotypes by the athletes themselves, impacting their self-esteem and professional self-concept (5). Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013) found that elite female athletes often interpret media images in ways that affect their perceptions of themselves, both positively and negatively (6).

Furthermore, the lack of media visibility and equitable representation can undermine female athletes' professional identities, making it challenging for them to be recognized as legitimate and competent professionals in their field (7). This diminished visibility also affects their opportunities for sponsorships and endorsements, which are crucial for career development in sports (8).

The psychological well-being of female athletes is closely tied to how they are represented in the media. Negative portrayals and the emphasis on physical attractiveness over athletic skill can lead to issues such as body dissatisfaction, performance anxiety, and mental health challenges (9).

Bissell (2024) discusses how mediated narratives around female athletes' mental health often highlight their struggles, sometimes perpetuating a one-dimensional view of their experiences (9).

Socially, media representation influences how female athletes are perceived by their peers, family, and the broader community. Positive media coverage can enhance social validation and community recognition, which are vital for building a supportive environment for athletes (10). Conversely, stereotypical or negative portrayals can lead to social stigma and a lack of support from important social networks (11).

The cultural context within which media representation occurs is critical. In many cultures, including Turkey, traditional gender roles and societal expectations shape how female athletes are portrayed and perceived. Ihnat (2021) conducted a multimodal analysis of strength and beauty in sports commercials, revealing how cultural narratives around femininity and athleticism are constructed and reinforced through media (12).

In Turkey, cultural and religious norms often influence the media portrayal of women, including athletes. Traditional expectations about modesty and gender roles can lead to representations that emphasize these aspects rather than the athletic achievements of women (13). This cultural framing can affect how female athletes view themselves and their roles both within sports and in the broader society.

To counteract negative media influences, it is essential for female athletes to develop media literacy skills, which involve critically engaging with media content and understanding its biases and impacts (14). Media training programs can empower athletes to navigate media interactions more effectively and advocate for more balanced and fair representations (15).

Advocacy and activism are also crucial. Female athletes and their allies can work towards changing media narratives by participating in gender equality campaigns, creating content that highlights their achievements, and challenging stereotypes (16). Athlete-led initiatives can play a significant role in shifting public perceptions and promoting a more inclusive media landscape (17).

Several case studies illustrate the diverse ways media representation impacts female athletes. For instance, McGannon et al. (2017) analyzed the media coverage of Kim Clijsters' comeback to tennis after motherhood, exploring how cultural narratives about motherhood and athleticism intersected. Their findings highlight the complexities female

athletes navigate in balancing personal and professional identities (18).

Similarly, the representation of Paralympic athletes in media often involves navigating additional layers of complexity related to disability and ability (19). Pearson and Misener (2022) discuss how Canadian Paralympic athletes perceive media coverage and its implications for their identities and advocacy efforts (20).

Recent trends indicate a gradual improvement in the media representation of female athletes, with more emphasis on their athletic achievements and personal stories (21). Social media has also provided a platform for athletes to self-represent and engage directly with their audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (22). This shift allows athletes to share their narratives and challenge stereotypes more effectively.

However, challenges remain. Studies continue to show that gender biases persist in both traditional and digital media (23). For instance, Yip (2016) found significant gender bias in online coverage of professional tennis, with male athletes receiving more favorable and extensive coverage than female athletes (24).

Moving forward, it is essential to continue researching and addressing the systemic issues that underpin media representation. Collaboration between media organizations, sports governing bodies, and advocacy groups can promote more equitable and balanced portrayals of female athletes (25). This article aims to explore the impact of media representation on female athlete identity and self-perception, focusing on participants from Istanbul, Turkey.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the impact of media representation on female athlete identity and self-perception. The research focuses on athletes based in Istanbul, Turkey, to provide a culturally and geographically specific context. The study participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they represent a diverse range of sports, competitive levels, and media exposure experiences. A total of 24 female athletes, aged between 18 and 35, participated in the study. These athletes were involved in various sports, including team sports such as basketball and volleyball, as well as individual sports like athletics and swimming.

The process of data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. This point was determined when no

new themes or insights were emerging from the interviews, indicating that the collected data sufficiently captured the complexity of the research topic.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, designed to allow in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perceptions. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was conducted in a private and comfortable setting to facilitate open and honest discussion. The interview guide included questions about the athletes' personal experiences with media representation, their perceptions of how media portray female athletes, and the impact of these representations on their identity and self-perception.

Interviews were conducted in Turkish, the native language of the participants, to ensure comfort and clarity in responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis followed these steps:

Familiarization with Data: The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to become thoroughly familiar with the content.

Generating Initial Codes: Initial codes were generated from the data, highlighting significant phrases and segments related to media representation, identity, and self-perception.

Searching for Themes: The codes were then grouped into potential themes that captured important aspects of the research questions.

Reviewing Themes: The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were coherent and distinct.

Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and named, providing a detailed account of what it encapsulated.

Producing the Report: Finally, the themes were organized into a coherent narrative, supported by direct quotes from the participants to illustrate the findings.

The analysis was conducted using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization and coding of qualitative data. Throughout the analysis process, the researchers engaged in regular discussions to ensure consistency and reliability in the coding and theme development. This collaborative approach helped in maintaining rigor and credibility in the findings.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 24 female athletes based in Istanbul, Turkey, representing a diverse range of sports and

competitive levels. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years, with an average age of 26. Among the participants, 10 were involved in team sports such as basketball (4 participants) and volleyball (6 participants), while the remaining 14 were engaged in individual sports, including athletics (5 participants), swimming (4 participants), tennis (3 participants), and gymnastics (2 participants). In terms of competitive levels, 8 participants were at the amateur level, 10 were semi-professional, and 6 were professional athletes. The majority of participants (18) reported having more than five years of experience in their respective sports, while the remaining 6 had between two to five years of experience.

Table 1. The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
1. Media Representation	1.1 Stereotyping	Gender roles, Physical appearance, Emotional portrayal, Objectification, Skill diminishment
	1.2 Media Visibility	Coverage frequency, Prime-time presence, Highlight reels, Feature stories, Media platform diversity
	1.3 Comparisons with Male Athletes	Skill comparisons, Pay disparity, Media attention, Sponsorship opportunities
	1.4 Positive Representation	Role models, Achievements, Overcoming challenges, Inspirational stories, Balanced portrayal
	1.5 Cultural Influences	Traditional gender roles, Religious influences, Societal expectations, Cultural norms
2. Identity Construction	2.1 Personal Identity	Self-confidence, Body image, Athletic identity, Gender identity
	2.2 Professional Identity	Athlete role, Career aspirations, Professional recognition, Sport-specific identity
	2.3 Media Influence on Identity	Internalization of stereotypes, Media role models, Media critique, Identity shifts
	2.4 Peer and Social Influence	Peer support, Social validation, Community recognition, Family expectations
3. Self-Perception	3.1 Self-Esteem	Self-worth, Confidence levels, Positive feedback, Negative feedback
	3.2 Body Image	Body satisfaction, Weight concerns, Athletic body ideals, Comparison with media images
	3.3 Performance Anxiety	Pressure to perform, Fear of failure, Media scrutiny, Public expectations
	3.4 Psychological Well-being	Mental health, Stress levels, Coping mechanisms, Support systems
4. Coping Mechanisms	4.1 Resilience Building	Positive self-talk, Goal setting, Overcoming setbacks, Mental training
	4.2 Support Networks	Coaching support, Family support, Peer networks, Mentorship
	4.3 Media Literacy	Critical consumption of media, Media training, Awareness of media bias, Media advocacy
	4.4 Advocacy and Activism	Gender equality campaigns, Representation advocacy, Athlete-led initiatives, Community engagement
	4.5 Personal Strategies	Media avoidance, Selective media engagement, Focusing on positives, Limiting social media exposure

3.1 Media Representation

Stereotyping: Female athletes often encounter stereotypical representations in media, where their gender roles and physical appearances are emphasized over their athletic abilities. Many athletes mentioned feeling objectified and reduced to their looks. One athlete remarked, "It's frustrating when the focus is more on what I'm wearing than how I perform." This stereotyping also includes emotional portrayal, where female athletes are depicted as more emotional and less skilled compared to their male counterparts.

Media Visibility: The frequency and quality of media coverage significantly affect female athletes. Participants noted that they receive less prime-time presence and fewer feature stories than their male counterparts. An athlete shared, "We train just as hard, but our achievements are barely highlighted on major platforms." The diversity of media platforms also plays a role in how often and where these athletes are seen.

Comparisons with Male Athletes: Female athletes are frequently compared to male athletes, often unfavorably. This includes skill comparisons, pay disparity, and unequal media attention and sponsorship opportunities. One

interviewee expressed, "It's disheartening to see male athletes being celebrated for things we do just as well, if not better."

Positive Representation: Despite the challenges, there are instances of positive representation where female athletes are portrayed as role models, highlighting their achievements and personal stories of overcoming challenges. These stories provide a more balanced and inspirational portrayal. As one athlete noted, "Seeing stories about women like me overcoming obstacles gives me hope and drives me to push harder."

Cultural Influences: Media representation is also shaped by cultural factors, including traditional gender roles, religious influences, societal expectations, and cultural norms. An athlete explained, "In our culture, women are often expected to be modest and reserved, which affects how we are portrayed in the media."

3.2 Identity Construction

Personal Identity: Media representation impacts athletes' personal identities, influencing their self-confidence, body image, athletic identity, and gender identity. One athlete said, "I sometimes struggle with my self-worth because the media doesn't see me as a serious athlete."

Professional Identity: Female athletes' professional identities are shaped by how they are portrayed in the media. This includes their role as athletes, career aspirations, professional recognition, and sport-specific identity. A participant mentioned, "The lack of media recognition makes it harder for us to be seen as professionals in our field."

Media Influence on Identity: The media plays a significant role in shaping athletes' identities by internalizing stereotypes, providing media role models, and provoking media critique, which can lead to identity shifts. One interviewee reflected, "I used to think I had to fit a certain mold to be successful, but now I see the importance of being true to myself."

Peer and Social Influence: Athletes' identities are also influenced by peer support, social validation, community recognition, and family expectations. As one athlete shared, "Having my family's support means the world to me, especially when the media doesn't acknowledge my efforts."

3.3 Self-Perception

Self-Esteem: Media representation significantly affects athletes' self-esteem, including their self-worth, confidence

levels, and the impact of both positive and negative feedback. One athlete confessed, "Negative comments in the media can really bring down my confidence."

Body Image: The portrayal of female athletes in the media influences their body satisfaction, weight concerns, and athletic body ideals, often leading to unhealthy comparisons with media images. An athlete expressed, "I sometimes feel pressured to look a certain way because of the images I see in the media."

Performance Anxiety: Media scrutiny and public expectations contribute to performance anxiety, with athletes feeling pressured to perform and fearing failure. One participant noted, "The fear of making mistakes is amplified when you know the media is watching."

Psychological Well-being: The overall psychological well-being of female athletes is affected by media representation, impacting their mental health, stress levels, coping mechanisms, and support systems. One athlete highlighted, "The constant media pressure can be overwhelming, but having a strong support system helps."

3.4 Coping Mechanisms

Resilience Building: Athletes employ various strategies to build resilience, including positive self-talk, goal setting, overcoming setbacks, and mental training. An interviewee stated, "Focusing on my goals and staying positive helps me stay resilient."

Support Networks: Support from coaches, family, peers, and mentors plays a crucial role in helping athletes cope with media pressures. One athlete shared, "Having a supportive coach who believes in me makes a huge difference."

Media Literacy: Developing media literacy helps athletes critically consume media, undergo media training, become aware of media bias, and engage in media advocacy. As one athlete mentioned, "Understanding how media works has empowered me to not take everything at face value."

Advocacy and Activism: Some athletes engage in advocacy and activism, participating in gender equality campaigns, representation advocacy, athlete-led initiatives, and community engagement. One athlete expressed, "Advocating for better representation is my way of making a difference."

Personal Strategies: Athletes adopt personal strategies to manage media exposure, such as media avoidance, selective media engagement, focusing on positives, and limiting social media use. One participant noted, "I avoid reading comments online to protect my mental health."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal that media representation significantly impacts female athletes' identity and self-perception, aligning with the broader body of literature on this topic. Thematic analysis of the interviews with 24 female athletes from Istanbul, Turkey, identified four main themes: media representation, identity construction, self-perception, and coping mechanisms. Each theme revealed distinct subthemes that further unpack the complexity of media influence on female athletes.

Stereotyping: Participants consistently reported experiencing stereotypical portrayals in the media, where their physical appearance and emotional attributes were emphasized over their athletic skills. This finding supports previous studies, such as Daniels (2009), which demonstrated how female athletes are often depicted as sex objects or less skilled compared to their male counterparts (26). Similarly, Antunovic (2017) found that Hungarian sports magazines often reduce female athletes to objects of aesthetic appreciation rather than recognizing their athletic abilities (3).

Media Visibility: The participants highlighted a significant disparity in media coverage between male and female athletes, with women receiving far less prime-time coverage and fewer feature stories. This aligns with Biscomb and Matheson's (2017) findings that female athletes are underrepresented in print media, even though there have been some improvements over the decades (2). The lack of visibility affects not only public perception but also the professional opportunities available to female athletes.

Comparisons with Male Athletes: The study participants noted that they are frequently compared to male athletes in ways that diminish their achievements. This phenomenon is well-documented in the literature, with Bowes and Kitching (2019) observing similar patterns in the coverage of female golfers competing in men's events (4). Such comparisons often emphasize gender differences and novelty rather than athletic skill and accomplishment.

Positive Representation: Despite the challenges, there were instances of positive media representation that provided balanced and inspirational portrayals of female athletes. These portrayals highlight their achievements and personal stories of overcoming obstacles. Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013) emphasize the importance of positive media images in shaping the self-perception and public perception of female athletes (6).

Cultural Influences: The cultural context within which media representations occur also plays a crucial role. In Turkey, traditional gender roles and societal expectations influence how female athletes are portrayed. This finding is consistent with Laine (2016), who found that media in Finland and Sweden also reflects and reinforces cultural norms regarding gender (13).

Personal Identity: Media representation affects athletes' personal identities, influencing their self-confidence, body image, athletic identity, and gender identity. Daniels and Wartena (2011) found that stereotypical media portrayals could lead to internalized stereotypes, negatively impacting self-esteem and body image (5).

Professional Identity: Female athletes' professional identities are shaped by how they are depicted in the media. The lack of media recognition can undermine their professional self-concept and hinder their career aspirations. Smith (2015) demonstrated that positive media representation is crucial for the professional validation and recognition of female athletes (7).

Media Influence on Identity: The internalization of media stereotypes and the presence of media role models were significant factors in how athletes viewed themselves. This finding supports the work of Krane et al. (2010), who highlighted the powerful role of media in shaping athletes' self-representation and identity shifts (11).

Peer and Social Influence: Social validation and peer support were vital in countering negative media influences. Harrison et al. (2009) found that supportive social networks are crucial for athletes' mental health and self-perception, reinforcing the importance of community and familial support (10).

Self-Esteem: The media's emphasis on physical appearance over athletic ability can undermine female athletes' self-esteem. This is consistent with Bissell (2024), who discussed how negative media portrayals contribute to mental health challenges among female athletes (9).

Body Image: Media representations significantly impact body satisfaction and athletic body ideals, often leading to unhealthy comparisons. Daniels (2009) highlighted the detrimental effects of media-driven body image ideals on young athletes, a finding echoed by participants in this study (26).

Performance Anxiety: The pressure to conform to media-driven expectations can lead to performance anxiety. This aligns with the findings of Bowes and Kitching (2019), who noted that female athletes often face increased scrutiny and

pressure in high-stakes environments due to media attention (4).

Psychological Well-being: The overall psychological well-being of female athletes is influenced by media representation, affecting their mental health, stress levels, and coping mechanisms. Bissell (2024) discussed how media narratives around mental health often focus on struggles, highlighting the need for more balanced portrayals (9).

Resilience Building: Athletes employ various strategies to build resilience, such as positive self-talk and goal setting. These strategies are crucial for maintaining mental toughness and coping with media pressures (11).

Support Networks: The role of supportive networks, including family, peers, and coaches, was emphasized by participants as essential for coping with media pressures. Harrison et al. (2009) also highlighted the importance of social support in fostering resilience and well-being among athletes (10).

Media Literacy: Developing media literacy helps athletes critically engage with media content and understand its biases. Osborne, Kavanagh, and Litchfield (2021) noted that media literacy can empower athletes to challenge stereotypes and advocate for fairer representation (14).

Advocacy and Activism: Participants engaged in advocacy efforts to promote gender equality and better media representation. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) discussed how female athletes use social media for self-representation and activism, challenging traditional media narratives (15).

Personal Strategies: Athletes adopt personal strategies, such as media avoidance and selective engagement, to manage the impact of media representation. These strategies are vital for protecting their mental health and maintaining focus on their athletic goals (22).

Despite the comprehensive insights provided by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to female athletes from Istanbul, Turkey, which may not be representative of all female athletes' experiences. The cultural context of Turkey also means that findings may not be generalizable to other regions with different cultural norms and media landscapes. Additionally, the study relied solely on self-reported data from interviews, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Future research should consider incorporating a larger, more diverse sample and using mixed methods to triangulate findings.

Future research should aim to address the limitations identified in this study by including a larger and more diverse sample of female athletes from various cultural and geographical backgrounds. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how media representation impacts athletes over time and across different stages of their careers. Additionally, exploring the role of new media platforms, such as social media, in shaping female athletes' identities and self-perceptions would be valuable. Investigating the perspectives of media producers and consumers could also provide a more holistic understanding of the dynamics at play. Finally, comparative studies between male and female athletes' media representation could highlight the specific challenges and opportunities unique to female athletes.

To improve the media representation of female athletes, several practical steps can be taken. Media organizations should strive for equitable coverage of male and female sports, focusing on athletic achievements rather than physical appearance or gender-based narratives. Training programs for journalists and media professionals on gender sensitivity and equitable reporting practices could help reduce biases in coverage. Sports organizations and governing bodies should advocate for better media representation of female athletes and provide media training to athletes to help them navigate media interactions effectively. Additionally, promoting media literacy among athletes and the general public can empower individuals to critically engage with media content and challenge stereotypes. By implementing these practices, we can create a more inclusive and supportive media environment for female athletes.

This study underscores the significant impact of media representation on female athletes' identity and self-perception. The findings highlight the need for more balanced and equitable media portrayals that focus on athletic achievements and personal stories rather than reinforcing stereotypes. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from media organizations, sports governing bodies, and society at large. By promoting fair and inclusive media representation, we can support the positive development of female athletes' identities and contribute to a more equitable sports culture.

Authors' Contributions

A.Ş. conceptualized the study, designed the research methodology, and supervised the data collection process.

D.S. conducted the semi-structured interviews, transcribed the recordings, and led the thematic analysis using NVivo software. E.T. assisted with participant recruitment, supported data analysis, and contributed to the literature review. N.K. provided critical insights during data interpretation and helped in drafting and revising the manuscript. All authors participated in discussing the findings, critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content, and approved the final version for publication.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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