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The Effect of Desire for Being Liked on Intention to Continue Sports: The Mediating Role of Social Media Self-Presentation

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the mediating role of social media self-presentation in the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue sports. This correlational survey study involved 357 students from the faculty of sports sciences. Data were collected using the Desire for Being Liked Scale, The Intention to Continue in Sports Scale, and the Social Media Self-Presentation Scale. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS 21 to test the measurement model. Normality tests, pearson correlation analysis, and bootstrap-based regression analysis were then used to test the hypotheses with SPSS 25 and the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2022). The study found that the desire to be liked was positively associated with the intention to continue sports, supporting hypothesis 1. According to the bootstrap-based regression analysis, the desire to be liked had a significant effect on social media self-presentation ($b=1.155$; $p<.001$). When a mediating variable was added to the model, it was observed that social media self-presentation is a significant predictor of the intention to continue sports ($b=.235$; $p<.01$). When the desire for being liked was held constant, it was determined that the direct effect on the intention to continue sports was not significant ($c'=.064$; $p>.05$). Finally, it was determined that the indirect effect of the desire to be liked on the intention to continue in sports, mediated by social media self-presentation, was significant ($b=.272$; 95% CI=.226-.442). The findings indicate that social media self-presentation mediates the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue sports among students in the faculty of sports sciences.

Keywords: Desire to be liked, intention to continue sports, mediation, social media self-presentation

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INTRODUCTION

Today, sports behavior has evolved into a multidimensional construct evaluated alongside social and psychological dynamics, rather than merely a field related to physical activity and health. Particularly with the influence of digitalization, individuals' relationship with sports is no longer limited to real-life settings but has also taken on an identity-presentation dimension that gains visibility on social media. In this process, individuals' tendencies to seek acceptance and approval from their social circles are considered among the psychosocial factors that may influence the direction of their behavior. From the perspective of individuals who participate in sports, this situation is not merely a process focused on physical development or performance; it can also be evaluated alongside self-expression and social feedback in digital environments. Within this framework, how the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports is shaped, and what role self-presentation via social media might play in this relationship, emerge as important areas of investigation. Considering both the active involvement of students in the faculty of sports sciences in sports and their intensity of social media use, it is believed that this group could constitute a meaningful sample for examining the relationships among these variables. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the relational structure among the desire to be liked, self-presentation on social media, and the intention to continue participating in sports.

The Desire to Be Liked and the Intention to Continue Participating in Sports

The desire to be liked reflects an individual's fundamental psychological motivation to be accepted and positively evaluated by their social environment (Leary, 2005; Salinas-Quiroz et al., 2023). Baumeister and Leary (1995), who argue that the need for social acceptance lies at the center of human behavior, emphasize that individuals' need to be valued and to feel a sense of belonging through social relationships is a fundamental determinant of behavioral orientations. In this context, the desire to be liked is viewed as a psychological construct that increases an individual's sensitivity to feedback from their social environment and enables them to adjust their behavior accordingly (Kim et al., 2025). Within the framework of social evaluation theory, individuals constantly monitor their self-worth through signals of social acceptance and shape their behavior accordingly (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). This mechanism can become particularly evident in digital and physical social environments where social feedback is intense.

Sports and physical activity behaviors stand out as areas where social evaluation processes exert a strong influence (Tang et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). It is noted that exercise behavior is not merely a health-related action but also a domain of identity that highlights socially valued characteristics such as discipline, self-efficacy, and physical appearance (Teixeira et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2017). For this reason, sports behavior is considered an important source of motivation that fulfills the need for social acceptance and approval, particularly among young adults. The literature emphasizes that social approval, social interaction, social context, and, more broadly, perceived social support positively influence continued participation in sports (Kaçay et al., 2026). The feedback individuals receive from their social environments plays a significant role in sustaining physical activity behavior by supporting participation in exercise. In particular, social support mechanisms and the

individual's social context increase participation in physical activity and reinforce the continuity of healthy behaviors (Carr et al., 2019; Nieboer & Cramm, 2019). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that social network interactions play a decisive role in continued exercise behavior, and that interactions established through online platforms and social fitness communities support its continuity (Stragier et al., 2016). Studies conducted on a Turkish sample also reveal that, in addition to social support, perceived social acceptance, and motivational factors (Aykora & Dinçer, 2022; Köse & Köse, 2025), elements such as group dynamics in team sports have significant effects on sports participation and the intention to continue participating in sports (Baykan et al., 2025). Furthermore, the current literature indicates that digital interaction processes are also a significant determinant of exercise behavior. In particular, fitness-focused social media interactions influence individuals' exercise motivation and behavioral intentions, both directly and indirectly (Xiao et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the intention to continue participating in sports is shaped not only by individual motivations but also by the social environment, group dynamics, and digital interaction processes.

The theory of planned behavior also supports this relationship. According to the theory, behavioral intention is determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). In particular, subjective norms strongly influence physical activity behavior, and the expectations an individual perceives from their social environment play a decisive role in the intention to continue participating in sports (Rhodes & Kates, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2020). In this context, the desire to be liked can serve as an indirect motivator for maintaining sports behavior by increasing an individual's sensitivity to signals of social acceptance. Because sports behavior is visible both physically and socially, the desire to be liked may further influence this behavior. The effect of the desire to be liked on behavioral intentions may therefore be shaped not only by individual attitudes but also by normative pressures perceived in the social environment. This suggests that subjective norms, as addressed in the theory of planned behavior, can indirectly influence intentions toward sports behavior when they intersect with the individual's need for social acceptance. This social interaction-based framework shows that the desire to be liked is not merely an internal motivational factor but must also be considered alongside how individuals present themselves to others. Therefore, examining the processes of self-presentation that take place on social media platforms provides an important explanatory mechanism for better understanding this relationship.

The Mediating Role of Social Media Self-Presentation

Social media self-presentation refers to an individual's conscious and strategic behaviors regarding how they present themselves to others on digital platforms, which aspects they highlight, and which identity traits they make visible (Liu & Lei, 2025; Muyidi, 2025). Self-presentation is considered a fundamental communication strategy aimed at meeting an individual's need for acceptance, positive evaluation, and management of their social identity in social interactions (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Research has shown that individuals tailor their posts on social media platforms to meet the expectations of their target audiences and employ selective self-presentation strategies to obtain positive feedback and

social recognition (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In this process, self-presentation serves as a key tool for identity management, impression formation, and the pursuit of social acceptance (Liu & Lei, 2025). Social media platforms provide digital spaces where self-presentation can be more controlled, selective, and curated than in traditional social settings. On these platforms, individuals aim to obtain positive social feedback by highlighting characteristics considered socially valuable, particularly physical appearance, success, and lifestyle (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). In this context, social media has become an interactive space where individuals can navigate the discrepancy between their ideal and real selves. Within this framework, posts related to sports and physical activity stand out among content centered on physical appearance and lifestyle.

It is evident that sports and physical activity content has become one of the most frequently used content types in social media self-presentation and one that receives the highest level of social feedback (Kim, 2024; López-Carril et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2025). Sharing content such as exercise, a fit appearance, and athletic performance helps create a positive perception that the individual leads a disciplined, healthy lifestyle (Yin et al., 2024). This situation demonstrates that sports behavior has evolved beyond a mere physical activity to become a visible arena for performance that generates social approval (Angrish et al., 2024). At this point, it also becomes important to note that self-presentation is grounded not only in behavioral but also in motivational and psychological foundations.

The psychological foundations of self-presentation on social media are directly related to the individual's need for social acceptance. It has been noted that individuals with high social acceptance motivation exhibit more strategic self-presentation behaviors in online environments, and that this behavior increases the likelihood of receiving social feedback (Toma & Hancock, 2013; Vogel et al., 2014). This feedback creates a cycle that reinforces the individual's self-esteem and behavioral motivation. In the context of sports, this process provides a critical mechanism for explaining the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating. Individuals with a strong desire to be liked tend to seek positive evaluations from their social circles and may therefore be more inclined to make sports-related content more visible. This self-presentation behavior is reinforced through social feedback (likes, comments, interactions) and can strengthen the individual's intention to continue participating in sports. In this context, social media self-presentation serves as a mediating mechanism linking the desire for approval and the intention to continue participating in sports. While the desire for approval may directly influence the intention to continue participating in sports, it can also exert an indirect influence, largely through the individual's self-presentation behaviors on social media.

The existing literature has demonstrated that social approval motivations influence exercise-related behaviors and that social factors play an important role in maintaining sports participation. However, limited attention has been given to the psychological and behavioral mechanisms underlying this relationship, particularly regarding how individuals' desire to be liked is transformed into behavioral intentions through social media self-presentation processes. Therefore, the mediating role of social media self-presentation in the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports remains

insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap, the present study contributes to the literature by integrating social approval motivation and digital self-presentation perspectives to explain the mechanisms underlying sports continuation intentions among students in the faculty of sports sciences.

Within this framework, it is hypothesized that the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports can be explained through the self-presentation processes individuals engage in on social media platforms. It is assessed that social media self-presentation may serve as a mediating mechanism, transforming the motivation to obtain social approval into behavioral intention. This study aims to examine the effect of sports science students' desire for approval on their intention to continue participating in sports and the mediating role of social media self-presentation in this relationship. To this end, the hypotheses of the study are as follows:

H_1: There is a positive relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports.

H_2: Social media self-presentation plays a mediating role in the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports.

METHOD

Research Model

This study aims to examine the effect of individuals' desire to be liked on their intention to continue participating in sports. Additionally, the mediating role of self-presentation on social media in this relationship was evaluated. The correlational survey model, a quantitative research method, was used in this study. The correlational survey model is a method frequently preferred in studies aimed at determining the direction and level of the relationship between two or more variables (Christensen et al., 2015). Identifying not only direct relationships but also mediating effects between variables in research contributes to the existing body of theoretical knowledge and enables a more comprehensive explanation of social behaviors (Gürbüz, 2021). Accordingly, the theoretical model planned to be tested in this study is presented in Figure 1.

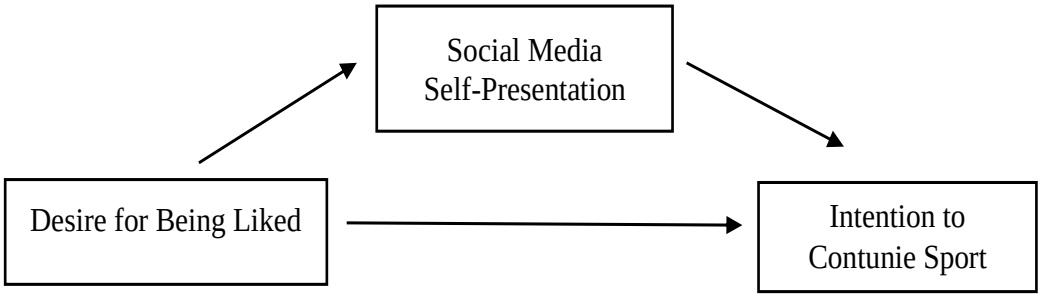


Figure 1. Research model

Research Group

The study population consists of students enrolled in the faculty of sports sciences in Turkey. The study group was determined using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a sampling

approach that involves the deliberate selection of individuals with specific characteristics aligned with the research objective (Patton, 2015). Accordingly, the study included students aged 18 or older, active social media users, and those who volunteered to participate. To determine the sample size for the study, a multiple regression analysis was conducted using the G*Power 3.1 program. The analysis was based on a significance level of α=.05, a power (1-β) of .95, and a moderate effect size (f^2=.10). The analysis determined that a minimum of 215 participants was required for the study to achieve sufficient statistical power. However, given the possibility of data loss and missing data, the sample size was increased, and the study was conducted with a total of 357 participants (Faul et al., 2009). The study included 154 female students (age=18-35, 21.22±3.417) and 203 male students (age=18-36, 21.30±3.359) enrolled in the faculties of sports sciences at various universities.

Data Collection Tools

Desire for Being Liked Scale (DBLS): The Desire for Approval Scale, developed by Kaşıkara and Doğan (2017), was used in the study to determine participants' desire for approval. The scale is a psychometric measurement tool designed to assess individuals' desire to be accepted and positively evaluated by their social environment. The scale is structured as a four-point likert scale. Consisting of nine items, the scale has a unidimensional structure and contains no reverse-scored items. Total scores on the scale range from 9 to 36; higher scores indicate a greater need for approval and social validation. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses conducted to examine the scale's construct validity revealed that the instrument's unidimensional structure possesses acceptable fit indices. Furthermore, the calculation of the scale's internal consistency coefficient as Cronbach's α=.82 indicates that the instrument possesses an adequate level of reliability.

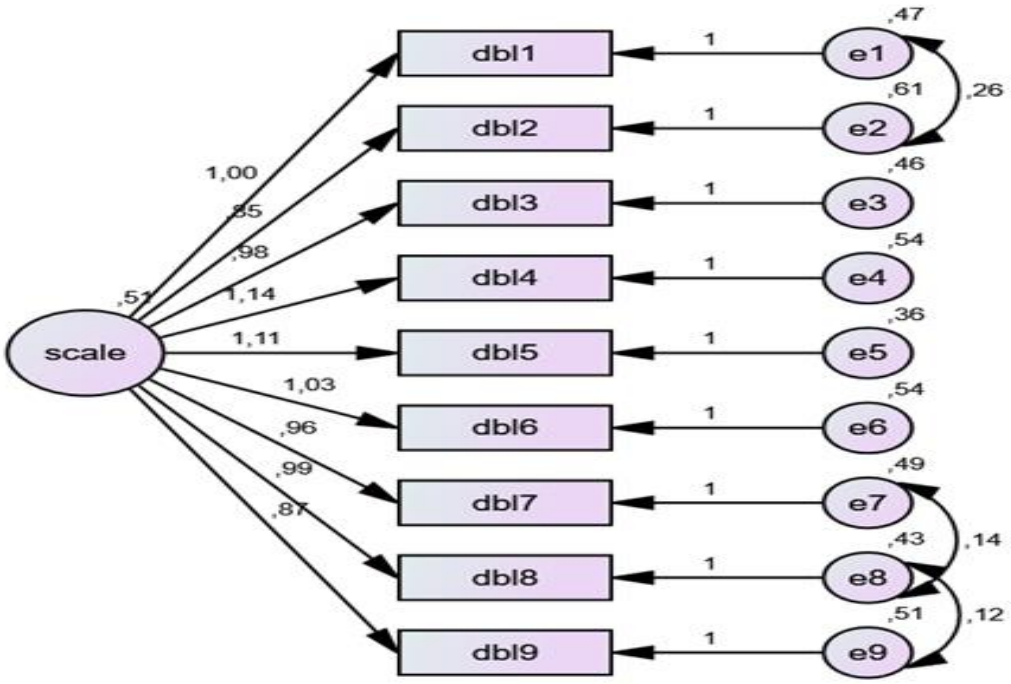


Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis of the desire for being liked scale (DBLS)

Intention to Continue Sport Scale (ICSS): In this study, the ICSS, developed by Özkurt et al. (2025) to measure individuals' intentions to continue participating in sports, was used. The scale is a psychometric instrument designed to assess individuals' likelihood of continuing to participate in physical activity and sports. The scale has a unidimensional structure, consists of six items, and is rated on a five-point Likert-type scale. Higher scores on the scale indicate a higher level of individuals' intention to continue participating in sports. In the development study, the scale's internal consistency coefficient was Cronbach's α=.98, and its test-retest reliability coefficient was ICCS=.92; these findings demonstrate that the scale is a highly reliable and valid measurement tool.

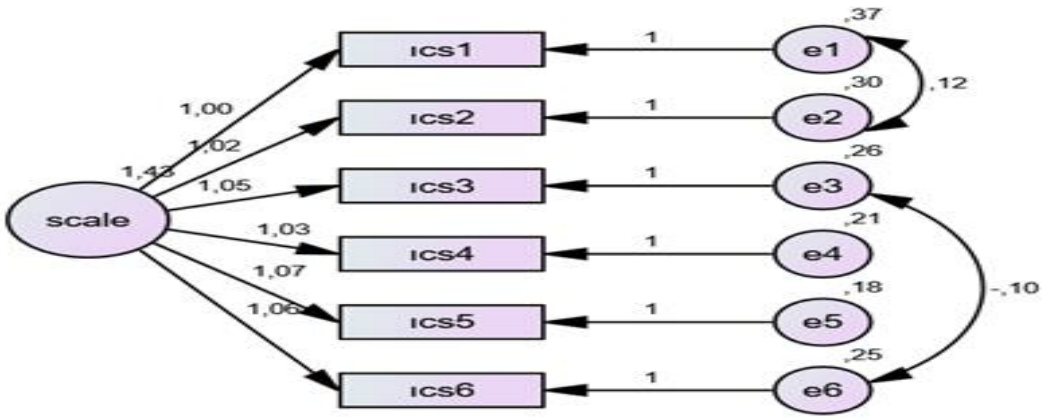


Figure 3: Confirmatory factor analysis of the ıntention to continue sport scale (ICSS)

The Social Media Self-Presentation Scale (SMPSS): This scale is a measurement tool designed to assess how individuals present themselves on social media platforms (Michikyan et al., 2015). The Turkish adaptation of the scale was developed by Avcı and Hazar (2024) and has been tailored to measure the self-presentation of social media users in Turkey. It consists of 12 items and is rated on a 5-point likert-type scale. The scale has two subscales (authentic self-presentation and inauthentic self-presentation). The internal consistency reliability of this scale, which measures individuals' self-presentation behaviors on social media profiles, has been reported as Cronbach's α = 0.76, and its test-retest reliability as r=.79.

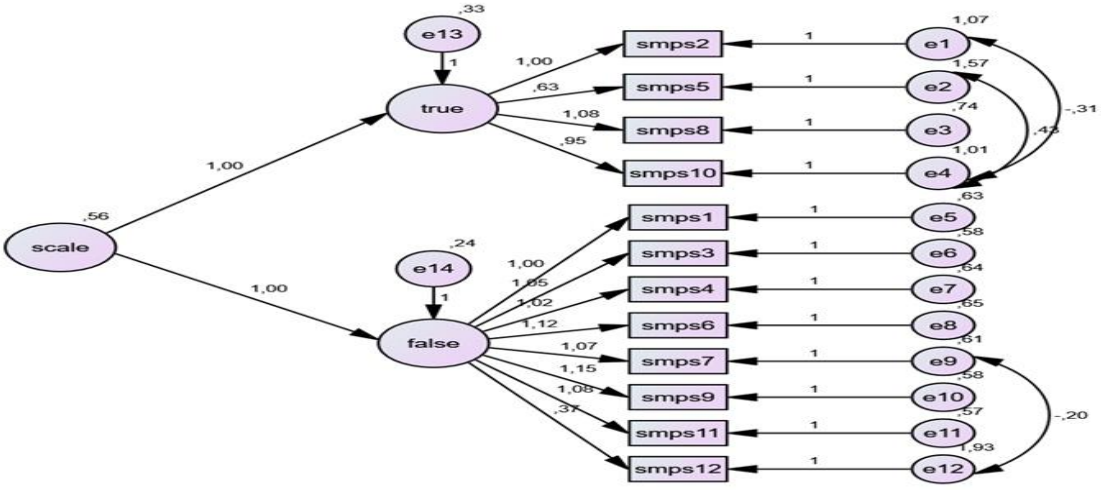


Figure 4: Confirmatory factor analysis of the social media self-presentation scale (SMPSS)

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to examine the construct validity of the measurement instruments employed in the study. As the data met the assumption of multivariate normality, the analyses were carried out using the maximum likelihood (ML) estimation method. Model adequacy was assessed based on commonly accepted goodness-of-fit indices reported in the literature. When necessary, theoretically justifiable modification indices were incorporated to improve overall model fit. The results of the measurement model are presented in tabular form, including the goodness-of-fit statistics, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients, skewness and kurtosis values, as well as the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) estimates for each scale. The evaluation of model fit followed the recommendations of Byrne (2016) and Gürbüz (2021). With respect to reliability, George and Mallery (2019) suggest that Cronbach's Alpha coefficients exceeding .80 indicate good internal consistency, whereas values above .90 reflect excellent reliability. For convergent validity, Fornell and Larcker (1981) recommend minimum values of .50 for AVE and .70 for CR. Nevertheless, Maruf et al. (2021) argue that an AVE value above .40 may still be considered acceptable when the corresponding CR value satisfies the recommended criterion.

Table 1. Goodness-of-fit ındices and threshold values for the scales used, normality, skewness and kurtosis, reliability (Cronbach's Alpha), AVE, and CR Values

Index	Good Fit	Acceptable	DBLS	ICSS	SMPSS
X^2/df	<3	<3(X^2/df)<5	2.167	1.968	4.921
GFI	>.95	>.90	.970	.988	.903
CFI	>.95	>.90	.983	.998	.906
RMSEA	<.05	<.08	.057	.052	.080
Cronbach Alpha	>.90	>.80	.905	.973	.881
Skewness	+1/-1	+1/-1	.738	-.573	.461
Kurtosis	+1/-1	+1/-1	-.074	-.752	.372
AVE	>.50	>.40	.504	.855	.492
CR	>.70	>.70	.901	.972	.916

Ethical Approval, Procedures, and Data Collection

To ensure the study's compliance with ethical principles, an application was submitted to the ethics committee for human research, health, and sports sciences at Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University prior to the start of data collection, and ethical committee approval was obtained via Decision No. 04/04 dated May 8, 2026. Throughout the research process, the updated principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, which establishes the fundamental ethical principles for scientific studies involving human participants, were taken into account; voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' rights were adopted as core principles. The helsinki declaration, updated by the world medical association in 2024, places particular emphasis on the protection of participant rights, data confidentiality, and research transparency. The data collection process lasted approximately one month, and the research data were obtained through face-to-face interviews with students enrolled in the faculties of sports sciences at various universities. Only individuals who voluntarily agreed to participate were included in the study, and the necessary permissions were obtained from participants prior to data collection via an informed consent form.

Data Analysis

The statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 21. Before conducting the primary analyses, the dataset was carefully examined for missing observations and potential outliers. Data normality was assessed using mahalanobis distance values,

standardized Z scores, and the skewness and kurtosis coefficients. Based on the criteria suggested by Hair et al. (2013), skewness and kurtosis values within the interval of -1 to +1 were considered indicative of an approximately normal distribution. Moreover, all standardized Z scores remained within the acceptable limits of ±3, further confirming that the normality assumption was satisfied. Scatterplot inspections also indicated that the relationships among the variables were adequately linear, with no noticeable deviations from linearity. To ensure that the regression assumptions were met, multicollinearity was examined before hypothesis testing. Tolerance statistics and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were calculated for each predictor. All tolerance values were greater than .20, whereas the corresponding VIF values were below the recommended cut-off value of 10, demonstrating that multicollinearity was not present in the data. Bivariate relationships among the study variables were then explored using pearson's correlation coefficients in order to determine both the strength and direction of the associations. The psychometric properties of the measurement model were assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) conducted in AMOS 21. After the adequacy of the measurement model had been established, the hypothesized mediation model was examined using Hayes' (2022) PROCESS Macro. Mediation was tested using Model 4, in which social media self-presentation was specified as the mediator. Indirect effects were estimated using a bootstrap procedure based on 5.000 resamples, following the recommendations of Hayes et al. (2017). Consistent with the approach proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) and Hayes (2022), mediation was regarded as statistically significant when the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero.

Common Method Bias Test

To evaluate the potential presence of common method bias (CMB), harman's single-factor test was conducted. All measurement items were entered into an exploratory factor analysis using the principal axis factoring extraction method. The results revealed a multidimensional solution, with four factors exhibiting eigenvalues greater than 1, indicating that the observed data were better represented by a multidimensional rather than a single-factor structure. When the analysis was constrained to a single-factor solution, the first factor accounted for 36.641% of the total variance. Previous research suggests that common method variance becomes a concern only when one factor explains more than 50% of the total variance (Eichhorn, 2014). Since the proportion of explained variance in the present study remained below this criterion, the findings indicate that common method bias is unlikely to represent a substantial threat. As an additional assessment, the intercorrelations among the study variables were examined. The highest observed correlation coefficient was r=.763, which is well below the commonly accepted threshold of r>.90 used to indicate potential common method variance problems (Podsakoff et al., 2024). This result further suggests that the constructs are empirically distinguishable and do not exhibit excessive shared variance attributable to the measurement method. Taken together, the findings from Harman's single-factor test and the correlation analysis provide converging evidence that common method bias is not a significant concern in the present study.

FINDINGS

Table 2. Correlations between variables and descriptive analyses

Variables	DBLS	ICSS	SMPSS	$\bar{X}$	SD.
DBLS	1			17.98	6.780
ICSS	.302**	1		21.44	7.560
SMPSS	.763**	.364**	1	30.30	10.261

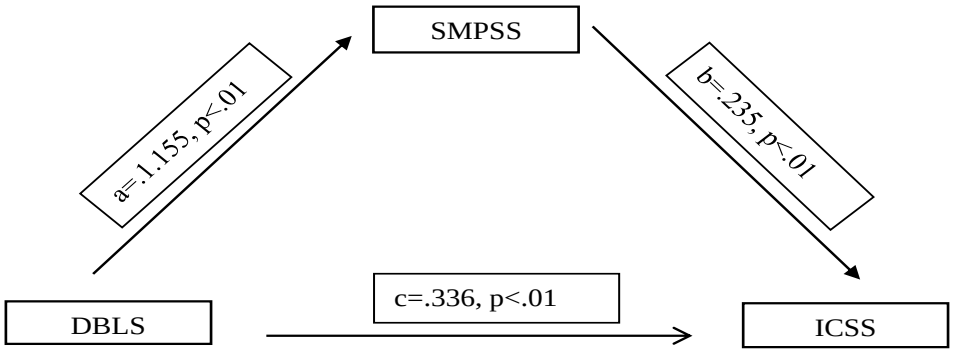
*p<.05, **p<.01

As presented in Table 2, the Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine the direction and magnitude of the relationships among the study variables. The results demonstrated a positive, low, and statistically significant association between the desire to be liked (DBLS) and the intention to continue participating in sports (ICSS) (r=.302, p<.01), suggesting that individuals with a stronger desire for social approval tend to report a greater intention to maintain their participation in sports. A strong positive correlation was identified between the desire to be liked (DBLS) and social media self-presentation (SMPSS) (r=.763, p<.01), indicating that individuals who engage more actively in self-presentation on social media are also more likely to exhibit a stronger desire to receive approval from others. In addition, social media self-presentation (SMPSS) showed a positive and moderate relationship with the intention to continue participating in sports (ICSS) (r=.364, p<.01). This finding suggests that greater engagement in social media self-presentation is accompanied by a higher intention to sustain participation in sports activities. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that all three variables are positively and significantly associated with one another, providing preliminary empirical support for the hypothesized relationships.

Table 3. Results of the regression analysis on the mediation test (n=357)

		Outcome Variables						
		M (SMPSS)				**Y(ICSS)**		
Predictor Variables		b	S.E.	LLCI-ULCI		b	S.E.	LLCI-ULCI
X (DBLS)	*a*	1.155**	.051	1.053/1.257	**c'**	.064	.085	-.103/.232
M (SMPSS)	-	-	-	-	b	.235**	.056	.124/.346
Constant	$İ_M$	13.3587	1.130	11.136/15.581	$İ_Y$	13.138	1.1881	10.802/15.475
		R^2=.582				R^2=.134		
		F(1;355)=495.795; p<.001				F(2; 27.381; p<.001)		

*p<.05, **p<.01; S.E: Standard Error, (b): Unstandardized beta coefficients



Direct Effect (c'):.064, p>.05
Indirect Effect=.272; %95 LLCI=0.226, ULCI=.442

Figure 5. The mediating role of social media self-presentation in the relationship between the desire for being liked and the intention to continue participating in sports

Table 3 and Figure 5 present the regression and bootstrap results regarding the mediating model between the desire to be liked (DBLS), social media self-presentation (SMPSS), and intention to continue participating in sports (ICSS). In the first stage of the model, the effect of the desire for approval (DBLS) on social media self-presentation (SMPSS) is positive and significant (b=1.155, p<.01, 95% CI=1.053-1.257). This result indicates that an increase in individuals' desire for approval significantly enhances self-presentation in social media environments. The model's explanatory power is high (R^2=.582; F(1.355)=495.795, p<.001). In the second stage, the effects of both the desire for approval (DBLS) and social media self-presentation (SMPSS) on the intention to continue participating in sports (ICSS) were examined. According to the findings, social media self-presentation has a positive and significant effect on ICSS (b=.235, p<.01, 95% CI=.124-.346). In contrast, the direct effect of the desire for approval was not found to be significant (c'=.064, p>.05, 95% CI=-.103-.232). The model's explanatory power is R^2=.134, and the model is generally significant (F (2.354)=27.381, p<.001). The results of the bootstrap analysis regarding the mediating effect indicate that social media self-presentation plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports (indirect effect=.272, 95% CI=.226-.442). The fact that the confidence interval does not include zero indicates that the indirect effect is statistically significant. Overall, the findings suggest that the effect of the desire to be liked on the intention to continue participating in sports is not direct but occurs largely indirectly through social media self-presentation. This indicates that social media self-presentation serves as an important mediating variable in the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of the desire to be liked on the intention to continue participating in sports and the mediating role of social media self-presentation in this relationship. The findings indicate that the desire to be liked is only weakly associated with the intention to continue participating in sports, but that this relationship becomes significant when mediated by social media self-presentation. Based on this, it can be argued that social approval motivations influence the sustainability of sports behavior not through direct effects but rather through digital self-presentation processes. When evaluated within the framework of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), this finding supports the view that perceptions of the social environment and subjective norms can indirectly shape an individual's behavioral intentions.

The fact that the desire to be liked is only weakly associated with the intention to continue exercising supports the multifactorial nature of physical activity behavior. Current sports psychology literature emphasizes that intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and behavioral habits are key determinants of the sustainability of exercise behavior (Beauchamp et al., 2019; Rebar et al., 2021; Rhodes & Brennan, 2026). Within the framework of self-determination theory, the pursuit of external approval may initiate behavior but does not ensure long-term sustainability unless it is internalized (Ryan & Deci, 2020). A study on sports motivation in Turkey also shows that intrinsic motivation is the determining factor in athletes' motivational

processes, while external social factors are more influential in the initial stages (Aydoğan, 2025). In this context, self-determination theory provides the fundamental motivational framework that explains the limited direct effect of the desire for approval on behavior.

The strong relationship between the desire for approval and self-presentation on social media indicates that individuals are turning to visibility-based strategies in the digital environment to meet their needs for social approval. Recent studies reveal that fitness-focused social media use increases both motivational processes and exercise intention among individuals (Xiao et al., 2025). Similarly, social media platforms can create an environment that encourages physical activity, but the effect varies with an individual's interaction with the content (Curtis et al., 2020; Goodyear et al., 2021). Furthermore, the literature indicates that social media-based interactions trigger social reward mechanisms that influence behavioral decisions, and that this process may be related to exercise behavior (Sherman et al., 2016).

The relationship between self-presentation on social media and the intention to continue participating in sports demonstrates that identity construction in the digital environment can influence individuals' attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral intention processes. Consistent with the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), this framework suggests that an individual's perception of their social environment and normative expectations can be decisive factors in shaping behavioral intentions. Within this framework, social media-based interactions can increase individuals' intentions to exercise by shaping their attitudes toward exercise and their perceptions of social norms (Yang, 2025). Current literature reveals that fitness-focused social media content, in particular, supports the formation of a "fit identity" among individuals and that this identity serves as an important motivational framework in sustaining exercise behavior (Klier et al., 2022; Dinh & Lee, 2025). Furthermore, it has been reported that social media use increases social comparison processes, and that this process can have both motivational and inhibitory effects on exercise behavior (Nesi et al., 2022). When evaluated within the framework of Goffman's theory of self-presentation (1959), this process also demonstrates that individuals make their behavior visible in the digital environment through impression management in order to gain social approval.

The most significant finding from the mediation analysis is that the effect of the desire to be liked on the intention to continue exercising occurs indirectly through social media self-presentation, rather than directly. This finding indicates that identity construction and strategic self-presentation processes in the digital environment serve as a critical mechanism for translating the need for social approval into behavior (Papacharissi, 2002). In other words, individuals express their need for social acceptance and approval not only as an internal motivation but also through behaviors aimed at generating online visibility and social feedback. The literature reveals that by making their fitness and exercise behaviors visible on social media, individuals not only gain social approval but also strengthen their tendency to sustain these behaviors (Curtis et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2025). This mechanism aligns directly with Goffman's theory of self-presentation (1959), demonstrating that individuals use social media as a stage to perform their self-image. These findings indicate that social media interactions are not limited to the mere display of behavior but also significantly influence individuals' assessments of how they are perceived by their social environment. In this

context, how individuals are perceived by others in social media environments has become a key factor, often serving as a primary determinant of their social relationships and online interactions (Avcı & Hazar, 2024).

Overall, this study demonstrates that sports behavior is shaped not only by psychological motivations but also by digital social interaction processes. Theoretically, the findings extend existing approaches such as the theory of planned behavior, self-determination theory, and self-presentation theory by showing that social media self-presentation functions as a mechanism through which the desire to be liked influences sports continuation intentions. Practically, the findings suggest that sports professionals and educators may consider digital identity processes and social media interactions when developing strategies to support sustained sports participation.

Strengths

One of the most significant strengths of this study is the testing of a theoretical model that explains the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports through social media self-presentation. The model was developed based on Goffman's theory of self-presentation (1959) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), providing a comprehensive framework for how sports behavior is shaped by social interaction processes in a digital context. Another strength of the study is that the sample size was determined using a G*Power analysis. Sample selection based on power analysis increased the study's statistical power, thereby supporting the reliability of the findings. Methodologically, the study employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), Pearson correlation analysis, and the hayes process macro (Model 4). Testing the mediating effect using the bootstrap method has strengthened the robustness of the analyses and the reliability of the results. Furthermore, the study employs a controlled research design with respect to both internal and external validity. Validating the construct validity of the scales via DFA, testing for common method bias, and conducting multiple linear correlation analyses support internal validity, while the sample consisting of students from the faculty of sports sciences strengthens the external validity of the study's findings for the relevant target audience.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. Since the research is based on a cross-sectional design, the relationships between variables cannot be interpreted causally. The collection of data through self-report scales carries the risk of social desirability bias and response distortion. This situation may mean that participants' assessments particularly regarding social media use do not fully reflect their actual behaviors. Furthermore, the fact that the sample consists solely of students from the school of sports sciences limits the generalizability of the findings to different age groups, non-athletes, or samples from other disciplines. Additionally, the use of purposive sampling may limit the representativeness of the sample and restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Future studies using probability sampling methods and more diverse samples are recommended to enhance the generalizability of the results.

Future Directions

Future research could examine how the relationship between the desire for approval and the intention to continue participating in sports is shaped by various psychological variables (e.g., self-efficacy, exercise addiction, perceived social support). Additionally, the causal effects of social media self-presentation could be more clearly demonstrated using longitudinal, experimental, and mixed-methods research designs. Conducting comparative studies across social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, etc.) could provide a more detailed explanation of the impact of digital self-presentation on sports behavior. Furthermore, future studies should examine different populations, including elite athletes, amateur athletes, non-athletes, and individuals from different age groups and cultural backgrounds, to evaluate the generalizability of the proposed model. Longitudinal studies could investigate changes in social media self-presentation and sports continuation intentions over time, while experimental and mixed-method designs could provide deeper insights into the causal mechanisms underlying these relationships.

Conclusion

This study examined the effect of the desire to be liked on the intention to continue participating in sports and the mediating role of social media self-presentation in this relationship. The findings indicate that the desire to be liked does not have a strong direct effect on the intention to continue participating in sports, but it does have a significant indirect effect mediated by social media self-presentation. This result highlights that not only individual psychological factors but also digital social interactions and self-presentation processes play a significant role in the sustainability of sports behavior. Particularly among sports science students, it is understood that self-presentation on social media, along with social approval mechanisms, is a critical factor shaping sports behavior. Overall, the study demonstrates that sports behavior in the digital age must be explained not only in terms of physical activity but also through processes of social visibility and identity construction. In this context, social media self-presentation emerges as a key mechanism explaining the relationship between the desire to be liked and the intention to continue participating in sports.

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Statement of Ethics Committee	
This research was conducted with the protocol decision dated 08/05/2026, and numbered 04/04 of the Ethics Committee of Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University.	
Statement of Conflict	
Researchers do not have any personal or financial conflicts of interest with other people and institutions related to the research.	
Statement of Support and Acknowledgment	
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Generative AI Use Statement	
An artificial intelligence was not used for data analysis, interpretation of results, or creation of scientific content.	

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