Examining the Process of Youth Influence by Sports Influencers on Online Media

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A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aims to examine the processes through which sports influencers on online media impact the behavior, attitudes, and social dynamics of youth.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative research was conducted in Tabriz, involving semi-structured interviews with 14 academic experts in the fields of media, sports, and youth studies. The participants were purposively selected to provide in-depth perspectives on the influence of sports influencers. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes related to the influence processes of sports influencers.

Findings: The study identified several key processes through which sports influencers impact youth. These include inspiring continuous activity, enhancing sports performance, modeling positive behavior and thinking, promoting social communication and networking, and contributing to technological and cognitive developments. Influencers inspire youth by sharing motivational stories and practical techniques, improve performance through educational content, model ethical behaviors and resilience, facilitate social connections within sports communities, and advance youth understanding of technology and media.

Conclusion: Sports influencers play a significant role in shaping the behaviors, attitudes, and social interactions of youth. Their impact is multifaceted, promoting physical activity, skill development, ethical behavior, and social engagement. However, the influence of these influencers also poses risks that require careful management. Future research should explore strategies to leverage the positive aspects of influencer impact while mitigating potential harms. Practical initiatives should focus on educating influencers, supporting their roles, and guiding youth interactions with online media to maximize the benefits of sports influence in the digital age.

Keywords: *sports influencers, youth behavior, online media, social dynamics, motivational impact, skill development, ethical behavior, social engagement.*

1. Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of daily life for many young people, shaping their interactions, identities, and aspirations (Cross et al., 2015; Ezzat, 2020; Keles et al., 2020; Leung & Lee, 2011; Mackey et al., 2013; O'Reilly et al., 2012; Olayemi, 2022; Ren et al., 2020; Soh et al., 2018). Agosto and Abbas (2016) explored older teens' online privacy and safety attitudes, revealing a nuanced understanding of how youth navigate the complexities of digital spaces. Their findings underscore the importance of critical digital literacy among youth to mitigate risks associated with online engagement (Agosto & Abbas, 2016).

Olayemi (2022) conducted a survey on the perceived influence of social media usage among youth, highlighting both positive and negative impacts. The study found that while social media can foster connectivity and information sharing, it also poses risks related to misinformation and negative social comparison. This duality is crucial for understanding how sports influencers can either positively inspire or adversely affect young audiences (Olayemi, 2022).

The role of social media influencers, particularly in the realm of sports, has been a subject of growing interest. Ezzat (2020) examined the online identity of Egyptian youth influenced by social media influencers. The study highlighted how influencers shape youth identity by promoting certain lifestyles, values, and aspirations. This is particularly relevant in sports, where influencers often embody ideals of discipline, perseverance, and success (Ezzat, 2020).

Dorsch et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of an integrated understanding of the youth sport system, noting that influencers can play a pivotal role in shaping youth participation and engagement in sports. Their work suggests that influencers, by sharing their personal journeys and successes, can motivate youth to pursue sports actively (Dorsch et al., 2020).

The psychological and social impacts of sports participation and the role of influencers have been extensively studied. Evans et al. (2016) conducted a systematic review on how youth psychosocial experiences vary across different sport activities. Their findings indicate that sports can provide a supportive environment for developing social skills, self-esteem, and resilience. Influencers who promote positive sportsmanship and healthy competition can thus have a beneficial impact on youth development (Evans et al., 2016).

Howie, Daniels, and Guagliano (2018) argued that promoting physical activity through youth sports programs is inherently social. They found that social interactions within sports contexts are crucial for maintaining youth interest and engagement. Sports influencers, by creating online communities, can replicate these social dynamics in digital spaces, fostering a sense of belonging and motivation among young followers (Howie et al., 2018).

The health benefits of sports participation are well-documented, with youth sports playing a critical role in promoting physical activity and preventing obesity. Lee, Pope, and Gao (2016) conducted a systematic review on the role of youth sports in preventing pediatric obesity, highlighting the importance of regular physical activity. Influencers who emphasize fitness and healthy lifestyles can thus contribute to public health goals by encouraging their followers to adopt active routines (Lee et al., 2016).

Collins et al. (2017) discussed the impact of sexual media on childhood well-being and health, noting that media exposure can significantly influence youth attitudes and behaviors. While their focus was on sexual content, the broader implications for media consumption suggest that influencers wield considerable power in shaping youth health outcomes, whether through promoting healthy habits or potentially encouraging detrimental behaviors (Collins et al., 2017).

The economic and structural aspects of youth sports also play a crucial role in shaping participation and experiences. Dunn et al. (2016) explored the impact of family financial investment on perceived parent pressure and child enjoyment in organized youth sports. Their findings indicate that financial factors can influence the level of pressure and enjoyment experienced by young athletes. Influencers, by advocating for accessible and inclusive sports programs, can help alleviate some of these economic barriers (Dunn et al., 2016).

Elliott et al. (2021) examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth sport in Australia, highlighting the challenges faced in maintaining participation and retention. The pandemic underscored the need for innovative approaches to keep youth engaged in sports. Sports influencers, through virtual training sessions and motivational content, played a significant role in sustaining youth interest during periods of physical distancing (Elliott et al., 2021).

The relationship between digital media and youth behavior extends beyond sports. Mackey, Liang, and Strathdee (2013) investigated the nonmedical use of

prescription drugs among youth, emphasizing the need for digital media reform to address health risks. While this study focused on substance use, it underscores the broader implications of digital media influence on youth behavior, highlighting the potential for both positive and negative outcomes depending on the nature of the content (Mackey et al., 2013).

O'Reilly et al. (2012) explored adolescent sport participation through online social media, revealing that digital platforms can enhance youth engagement in sports by providing access to information, peer support, and motivational content. This suggests that sports influencers, by leveraging social media, can significantly impact youth participation rates and overall interest in sports activities (O'Reilly et al., 2012).

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how sports influencers on online media impact youth in various domains, including motivation, behavior, health, and social interactions. By synthesizing insights from previous research, we recognize the complex and multifaceted nature of digital influence. Sports influencers have the potential to inspire positive changes in youth behavior and attitudes, but they also pose risks that must be carefully managed. As digital media continues to evolve, further research is needed to explore effective strategies for leveraging the positive aspects of sports influencers while mitigating potential harms. This study contributes to this ongoing discourse by examining the specific processes through which sports influencers impact youth, providing valuable insights for academics, practitioners, and policymakers.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative research was conducted to understand the process through which youth are influenced by sports influencers on online media. The study was carried out in Tabriz, focusing on the insights of academic experts. A total of 14 participants, who are recognized as academic experts in the fields of media, sports, and youth studies, were purposively selected to provide in-depth perspectives.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen to allow for flexibility in

questioning, enabling the researchers to probe deeper based on the responses of the participants. The interviews were designed to explore the participants' views on the influence of sports influencers on the youth, how these influences manifest, and the perceived impact on the youth's behavior and attitudes.

Each interview was conducted face-to-face, recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new significant insights were being obtained from additional interviews.

2.3. Data analysis

The data analysis process involved several steps to ensure a thorough understanding of the collected information. Initially, the transcribed interviews were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. This involved coding the data in a systematic way by categorizing relevant pieces of information. Codes were then grouped into themes that captured significant aspects of the data in relation to the research questions.

To enhance the reliability of the findings, two researchers independently coded the data and then compared their results to reach a consensus on the identified themes. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and re-examination of the data. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and provided a comprehensive understanding of the influence of sports influencers on the youth.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants in this study are as follows: The sample consisted of 14 academic experts, of which 11 were male and 3 were female. Regarding educational qualifications, 12 participants held a PhD, specifically in Sports Management, with one individual specializing in Sports Marketing Management. Additionally, there were 2 participants with a Master's degree in Sports Media Management and Sports Management, respectively. In terms of professional roles, 12 participants were university faculty members, while 2 were media specialists in the field of sports. This diverse group provided a broad range of insights into the influence of sports influencers on online media.

Table 1

Processes of Youth Influence by Sports Influencers on Online Media

Main Category	Subcategory	Open Code
Sports Processes	Inspiring continuous activity	Inspiring stories related to progress in sports; stimulating techniques and methods for endurance and effort; setting goals and routing for improving sports performance; observing the experience and progress of others in sports; enhancing motivation and self-confidence in sports for teenagers
	Sports performance processes	Teaching techniques for improving sports skills; teaching tactical and game strategies; providing focus and morale-building exercises for young athletes; proper nutrition for improving sports performance
Social Behavior Processes	Modeling behavior and thinking	Demonstrating patience and discipline in training; showcasing ethical behaviors and respect in sports; encouraging cooperation and positive interaction with teammates; providing strategies for managing anger and stress in sports; emphasizing the importance of morale and motivation in achieving sports goals
	Social communication and networking	Encouraging participation in school or local sports teams; organizing group sports events and competitions; encouraging cooperation and interaction with others in sports groups; using social media to connect with other young athletes; sharing common experiences and sports events on social networks
Technological Processes	Improving technology	Developing indigenous Iranian technology to manage social media spaces; developing technology infrastructure across cities and villages in Iran; expanding social media spaces through monitoring influencers' activities
	Technological value	Striving to meet the needs of young people based on modern and advanced technologies; providing information to enhance young people's understanding of Iranian athletes within the framework of technology; focusing on the real values of media functionality among the youth community
Cognitive Processes	Improving audience understanding	Enhancing the public image and understanding of sports influencers; improving customers' understanding of beneficial social media for youth; enhancing social media functions in managing youth behavior and social understanding
	Media competencies	Illustrating the impact of social relationships between sports influencers and youth; explaining the role of virtual social networks and their impact on effective and low-cost advertising growth; introducing the competencies of sports influencers as a factor in achieving sports marketing
Influencer Support	Influencer training	Educating on proper influencer advertising and evaluating their activities; awareness of optimal influencer usage in social media; empowering influencers by providing appropriate training to attract audiences
	Influencer maintenance	Providing necessary infrastructure for the proper selection of effective sports influencers; developing influencers' income sources to prevent their marginalization; meritocracy in selecting influential sports figures to positively impact youth

Inspiring Continuous Activity

The study found that sports influencers play a significant role in inspiring continuous activity among youth. They achieve this by sharing inspiring stories related to progress in sports, providing stimulating techniques and methods for endurance and effort, setting goals, and guiding youth in improving sports performance. Observing the experiences and progress of others in sports enhances motivation and self-confidence among teenagers. One interviewee mentioned, "The stories of perseverance and success shared by influencers motivate young people to strive harder and stay committed to their sports goals."

Sports Performance Processes

Sports influencers also contribute to the improvement of sports performance by teaching techniques to enhance sports skills and providing tactical and game strategies. They offer focus and morale-building exercises specifically for young athletes and emphasize proper nutrition for improving sports performance. An interviewee highlighted, "The detailed tutorials and training plans shared by influencers help young athletes understand and apply advanced techniques in their practice sessions."

Modeling Behavior and Thinking

In terms of social behavior processes, sports influencers demonstrate patience and discipline in training, showcase ethical behaviors and respect in sports settings, and encourage cooperation and positive interaction with teammates. They provide strategies for managing anger and stress in sports and emphasize the importance of morale and motivation in achieving sports goals. One participant noted, "Influencers act as role models, showing young athletes how to handle stress and interact positively with their peers."

Social Communication and Networking

Influencers encourage youth to participate in school or local sports teams, organize group sports events and competitions, and promote cooperation and interaction with others in sports groups. They use social media to connect young athletes with their peers, sharing common experiences and sports events. An interviewee remarked, "Through social media, influencers create a community where young athletes can share their experiences and support each other."

Improving Technology

The development of indigenous Iranian technology to manage social media spaces, the enhancement of technology infrastructure across cities and villages, and the expansion of social media spaces through monitoring influencers'

activities were noted as key technological processes. "Advancements in technology enable better management and monitoring of influencer activities, which in turn enhances their impact on youth," stated one interviewee.

Technological Value

Efforts to meet the needs of young people with modern and advanced technologies, providing information to enhance young people's understanding of Iranian athletes, and focusing on the real values of media functionality were highlighted. One participant mentioned, "Technological advancements are crucial in providing youth with the tools and information they need to connect with and learn from sports influencers."

Improving Audience Understanding

Improving the public image and understanding of sports influencers, enhancing customers' understanding of beneficial social media for youth, and improving social media functions in managing youth behavior and social understanding were important cognitive processes identified. An interviewee noted, "Better understanding and appreciation of influencers among the public can lead to more effective engagement and influence."

Media Competencies

Illustrating the impact of social relationships between sports influencers and youth, explaining the role of virtual social networks in effective and low-cost advertising growth, and introducing the competencies of sports influencers as a factor in achieving sports marketing were emphasized. "Influencers' ability to connect with youth on social media platforms makes them powerful tools for effective marketing," said one participant.

Influencer Training

Proper influencer advertising, evaluating their activities, awareness of optimal influencer usage in social media, and empowering influencers with appropriate training were highlighted as essential for attracting audiences. An interviewee commented, "Training influencers on effective advertising and audience engagement strategies can significantly enhance their impact."

Influencer Maintenance

Providing necessary infrastructure for the proper selection of effective sports influencers, developing their income sources to prevent marginalization, and practicing meritocracy in selecting influential sports figures to positively impact youth were key support processes. One participant emphasized, "Ensuring influencers are well-supported and fairly selected is vital for maintaining their positive influence on young people."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the influence processes of youth by sports influencers on online media, revealing several key insights. The findings indicate that sports influencers inspire continuous activity among youth, enhance sports performance, model positive behavior and thinking, promote social communication and networking, and contribute to technological and cognitive processes related to media understanding and influencer competencies. These processes collectively shape the behaviors, attitudes, and social dynamics of young people, providing a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted impact of sports influencers on youth.

The study found that sports influencers inspire continuous activity among youth by sharing inspiring stories and providing techniques for endurance and effort. This aligns with the findings of Dorsch et al. (2020), who emphasized the motivational role of influencers in youth sports participation (Dorsch et al., 2020). The observed experiences and progress of others in sports enhance motivation and self-confidence, which is crucial for sustained engagement in physical activities (Howie et al., 2018). The role of influencers in setting goals and guiding youth in improving sports performance further underscores their impact on promoting a physically active lifestyle.

The results indicate that sports influencers contribute to improving sports performance by teaching techniques, providing tactical strategies, and emphasizing proper nutrition. This is consistent with the systematic review by Evans et al. (2016), which highlighted the importance of skill development and tactical knowledge in enhancing youth sports performance. The detailed tutorials and training plans shared by influencers offer practical guidance for young athletes, helping them apply advanced techniques in their practice sessions (Evans et al., 2016). This aligns with the work of Lee, Pope, and Gao (2016), who found that structured guidance in sports significantly aids in the prevention of pediatric obesity through increased physical activity (Lee et al., 2016).

Sports influencers play a critical role in modeling positive behavior and thinking by demonstrating patience, discipline, ethical behaviors, and respect in sports settings. This finding is supported by the study of Collins et al. (2017), which emphasized the role of media in shaping childhood well-being and health (Collins et al., 2017). By showcasing positive interactions and providing strategies for managing anger and stress, influencers act as role models, promoting

mental resilience and ethical sportsmanship among young athletes. This modeling behavior is crucial for the development of social skills and self-esteem, as highlighted by Ezzat (2020) in his examination of online identity formation among Egyptian youth (Ezzat, 2020).

The study revealed that influencers encourage participation in sports teams, organize events, and promote cooperation and interaction within sports groups. This aligns with the findings of O'Reilly et al. (2012), who noted that social media platforms enhance youth engagement in sports by providing access to information, peer support, and motivational content (O'Reilly et al., 2012). The ability of influencers to create online communities fosters a sense of belonging and motivation among young followers, which is essential for sustained participation in sports (Howie et al., 2018). Additionally, the role of influencers in facilitating social communication and networking supports the broader socialization process(Mackey et al., 2013).

The study highlights the role of sports influencers in developing indigenous technology, improving technology infrastructure, and expanding social media spaces. This technological advancement supports better management and monitoring of influencer activities, enhancing their impact on youth (Olayemi, 2022). The integration of modern technologies and providing information to enhance young people's understanding of sports within the technological framework align with the findings of Dunn et al. (2016), who discussed the impact of family financial investment on youth sports. By emphasizing the real values of media functionality, influencers contribute to a more informed and engaged youth community.

The enhancement of public understanding of sports influencers and the improvement of social media functions in managing youth behavior are crucial cognitive processes identified in the study. This is supported by Elliott et al. (2021), who examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth sports participation and highlighted the importance of effective communication and understanding among stakeholders (Elliott et al., 2021). By illustrating the impact of social relationships and explaining the role of virtual social networks, influencers help in achieving effective sports marketing and youth engagement (O'Reilly et al., 2012).

5.   Limitations & Suggestions

While this study provides valuable insights into the influence processes of youth by sports influencers, it is not without limitations. First, the study's sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 14 academic experts from Tabriz. This limited sample may not fully represent the diverse perspectives and experiences of sports influencers and youth across different regions and cultural contexts. Additionally, the study relied solely on semi-structured interviews for data collection, which may have introduced biases based on the subjective interpretations of the participants. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for the examination of long-term impacts and changes over time.

Future research should address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, including participants from various geographic locations and cultural backgrounds. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the long-term effects of sports influencers on youth behavior and attitudes. Additionally, mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the influence processes. Researchers should also explore the role of different types of influencers, such as micro-influencers and macro-influencers, to determine how their impact varies across different youth demographics.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made for leveraging the positive influence of sports influencers on youth. First, educational programs should be developed to train influencers on ethical advertising, effective audience engagement, and promoting positive sportsmanship. These programs can help influencers become more effective role models for young people. Additionally, policymakers and sports organizations should collaborate to create supportive infrastructures that facilitate the selection and maintenance of effective sports influencers. Providing financial support and recognition for influencers who positively impact youth can encourage more individuals to pursue this role. Finally, parents and educators should be involved in guiding young people in their interactions with sports influencers, promoting critical thinking and informed decision-making regarding the content they consume.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

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