Exploring the interplay between academic and athletic identities among elite student athletes in tertiary education in Ireland

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Abstract

The pursuit of higher education presents unique challenges for elite student-athletes, who must balance academic responsibilities with the demands of athletic performance. Understanding how these individuals manage these dual roles is crucial for developing effective support systems in academic and athletic settings. This study investigated the interplay between academic and athletic identities among elite student-athletes in Ireland, focusing on the influence of motivation and social support. Data were collected using a cross-sectional online survey from 100 elite student-athletes, defined as individuals participating in elite-level sports while enrolled in full-time tertiary education in Ireland. The survey included validated measures of academic identity, athletic identity, motivation, and social support. The results show that the majority of participants identified primarily as student-athletes, with greater emphasis on their academic careers. Motivation was a significant predictor of both academic and athletic identities, while social support had no significant effect. These findings challenge the assumption that elite student-athletes predominantly prioritise their athletic roles and underscore the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation. Institutions are encouraged to implement tailored interventions, such as academic mentorship and flexible academic policies, to support student-athletes in balancing their dual careers. Future research should explore the underlying factors behind the minimal impact of social support and further examine motivation-based interventions.

Keywords: Dual Career Student Athletes, Elite Student Athletes, Identity, Motivation, Tertiary Education

İrlanda'daki yükseköğretimde elit öğrenci sporcular arasında akademik ve atletik kimlikler etkileşiminin araştırılması

Öz

Yükseköğrenim, akademik sorumlulukları atletik performans talepleriyle dengelemek zorunda olan elit öğrenci sporcular için benzersiz zorluklar sunmaktadır. Bu bireylerin iki rolü nasıl yönettiklerini anlamak, akademik ve atletik ortamlarda etkili destek sistemleri geliştirmek için önemlidir. Bu çalışma, İrlanda'daki elit öğrenci sporcular arasında akademik ve atletik kimliklerin etkileşimini, motivasyon ve sosyal desteğin etkisine odaklanarak incelemiştir. Veriler, İrlanda'da tam zamanlı yükseköğrenime devam eden ve elit seviyede spor yapan 100 elit öğrenci sporcudan, kesitsel bir çevrimiçi anket aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Anket, akademik kimlik, atletik kimlik, motivasyon ve sosyal destek gibi doğrulanmış ölçütler içermekteydi. Sonuçlar, katılımcıların çoğunluğunun öncelikli olarak öğrenci-sporcu kimliğini benimsediğini ve akademik kariyerlerine daha fazla önem verdiğini göstermiştir. Motivasyon hem akademik hem de atletik kimliklerin önemli bir belirleyicisi iken, sosyal desteğin anlamlı bir etkisi bulunmamıştır. Bu bulgular, elit öğrenci sporcuların öncelikli olarak atletik rollerini önemsediklerine dair varsayımlara meydan okumakta ve içsel motivasyonun teşvik edilmesinin önemini vurgulamaktadır. Kurumlar, öğrenci sporcuların iki kariyeri dengelemelerini desteklemek için akademik mentorluk ve esnek akademik politikalar gibi özel müdahaleler uygulamaya teşvik edilmektedir. Gelecek araştırmalarda, sosyal desteğin minimal etkisinin ardındaki faktörleri araştırmalı ve motivasyon temelli müdahaleleri daha ayrıntılı incelenmelidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Çift Kariyerli Öğrenci Sporcular, Elit Öğrenci Sporcular, Kimlik, Motivasyon, Üçüncül Eğitim*

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INTRODUCTION

In Ireland, elite student athletes, defined as full-time students participating in elite-level sports (European Commission, 2012; Aquilina, 2013), face a unique landscape in tertiary education. Tertiary education is a significant period marked by life changes and challenges, including transitions, time management, academic pressures, and mental health considerations (Auerbach et al., 2018; Deasy et al., 2014; Jeyagowri & Ilankumaran, 2018; Lipson et al., 2019; Price, 2019; Steare et al., 2023; Unesco, 2020; Wolters & Brady, 2021). For elite student-athletes in Ireland, the landscape becomes more intricate, as they must navigate the dual demands of academic and athletic responsibilities, often without the comprehensive support systems found in other countries (Saunders et al., 2021; Gomez et al., 2018). The "dual career" model, introduced by the European Commission in 2012, recognises the commitment of students undertaking both academic and athletic pursuits, highlighting the delicate balance they must maintain. Managing a dual career of academia and sports poses challenges, with student athletes dedicating over 30 hours per week to each domain while also managing part-time jobs (Aquilina, 2013; Stambulova et al, 2015). This constant struggle for balance prompts choices between commitments, with arguments suggesting that success in one domain may hinder success in the other (McGillivray, Gearn & McIntosch, 2005). These individuals face distinct challenges, necessitating an exploration of their academic and athletic identities (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

Defining academic and athletic identities

The study of academic and athletic identity aims to understand the interplay between these identities in the lives of elite student athletes (Ivarsson et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The European Network of Students (EAS) defines an elite student athlete as someone who competes regionally, nationally, or internationally while pursuing full-time tertiary education (EAS, 2022). Academic and athletic identities are distinct aspects of self-concept, based on one's interest and affiliation with academics and athletics (Brewer et al., 1993; Steele & Ashley, 2020).

Academic identity

The academic identity of student-athletes is a multifaceted construct that has garnered significant attention in research (Ewing & Allen, 2017; Mortimer et al., 2015). Academic identity is the self-meaning that results from an individual's status as a student (Stryker & Burke, 2000). It is characterized by the intersection of personal life experiences and unique conditions in tertiary education, based on students' self-evaluations of their own intelligence

(DeCandia, 2014; Ewing & Allen, 2017; Kaplan & Flum, 2010; Mortimer, 2015). Academic identity influences judgments about future career routes and can be a predictor of student motivation, goal-orientation, academic commitment, persistence, and effective performance in academic domains (Lairio et al., 2013; Quinaud et al., 2020). Academic identity is shaped by factors such as role requirements, academic achievements, peers, and lecturers, and can be threatened by academic pressure and perceptions of failure, leading to identity challenges among students (Kaplan & Flum, 2010; Smith, 2010). Importantly, this identity evolves over the course of students' academic experiences (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004), highlighting the importance of positive college environments in shaping student-athletes' perceptions of their academic abilities.

Athletic identity

Accompanying academic identity, elite student athletes develop athletic identities. Athletic identity is the degree of personal significance and self-definition associated with an athlete's role, which is closely linked to their sense of self (Brewer et al., 1993; Moazami-Goodarzi et al., 2020; Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Steele & Ashley, 2020). While a strong athletic identity has benefits, including self-discipline, teamwork, confidence, and interpersonal skills, overemphasis on athletic excellence can negatively impact student-athlete wellbeing and lead to psychological distress post-career (Baumesiter & Showers, 1986; Eklund & DeFreese, 2020; Galli & Gonzales, 2015; Griffith & Johnson, 2002). Significant time and energy are invested in sports, which can lead to a strong athletic identity that may take precedence over other aspects of self, such as academic or social identities (Brewer et al., 1993; Lally & Kerr, 2005). Specifically, Stambulova & Wylleman (2019) noted that elite athletes devoted over 30% of their lives to their athletic activities, profoundly influencing their identity (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). When athletic identity becomes dominant, it can lead to a narrowing of focus and a neglect of other important aspects of personal development, such as academic achievement, social relationships, and career preparation (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Lavallee, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Reifsteck et al., 2016; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Moreover, a strong athletic identity can make the transition out of sport particularly difficult, as athletes may struggle to redefine their sense of self and purpose when their athletic careers come to an end (Lavallee, 2005; Stambulova et al., 2009). This is particularly concerning for student-athletes, who must navigate the challenges of balancing their athletic and academic roles. Therefore, it is essential for dual career athletes to develop a balanced identity that encompasses both their athletic and academic roles, allowing them to

navigate the demands of their unique position and prepare for life beyond their athletic careers (Aquilina, 2013; Ryba et al., 2017).

The development of student-athlete identity

Identity formation is a complex and dynamic process that plays a critical role in an individual's sense of self. This process continuously evolves and is shaped by multiple social contexts (Côté, 2006; Erikson, 1968; Talaifar & Swann, 2018). For dual career athletes, who navigate both academic and athletic environments, developing identity involves managing two distinct sets of social expectations and norms (Jones & Lavallee, 2009; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Sturm et al., 2011). Among elite athletes, athletic identity often takes precedence; however, it may decrease over time as a protective mechanism (Antshel et al., 2016; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Several theoretical models offer frameworks for understanding the development of student-athlete identity.

Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors framework (1993) posits that individuals proceed sequentially through seven stages of psychosocial development, beginning with the development of competence and progressing through the management of emotions, moving from autonomy to interdependence, the development of mature interpersonal relationships, the establishment of identity, the development of purpose, and ending with the development of integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The development of student-athlete identity can be described primarily with the vectors of developing competence, managing emotions, and establishing identity.

Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory (1968) outlines eight stages of identity development, with the fifth stage, identity vs. role confusion, aligning with the age group of third-level student-athletes. This stage encompasses the search for a sense of self and identity, accomplished through the exploration of goals, values, and beliefs (Erikson, 1968). This theory helps explain how these individuals navigate their dual roles and the potential conflicts that arise, impacting their identity integration. It provides a developmental perspective on how student-athletes resolve these challenges, leading to a more stable sense of self.

The Developmental Model of Sport Participation (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007) suggests that student-athletes' athletic identity evolves as they progress through three stages of sport participation: the sampling years (ages 6-12), the specialising years (ages 13-15), and the investment years (ages 16+). By exploring how student-athletes transition through the

specialising and investment years, this model helps explain shifts in identity focus. It is particularly useful for contextualising the athletic commitment and its influence over time.

Relevant to the impact of social support on identity formation, Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1978) suggests that student-athletes' identities are influenced by their membership in various social groups, such as their team, academic programme, and peer groups. The theory posits that individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity by comparing their group to others, which can lead to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel, 1978). For student-athletes, this may manifest as a stronger identification with their athletic role, particularly if they perceive their team as more prestigious or successful than their academic programme.

Factors impacting the development of student-athlete identity

The role of motivation among student-athletes

Motivation is generally understood as the drive behind behaviour (Graham & Weiner, 2012). According to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), there are three basic psychological needs that all individuals require for optimal functioning and well-being: competence (feeling effective in one's actions), relatedness (feeling connected to others), and autonomy (feeling in control of one's choices and behaviors). When these needs are satisfied, individuals are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation (i.e., the desire to engage in an activity for its own sake, rather than for external rewards or punishments), however when these needs are undermined, individuals may experience reduced motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) is a sub-theory of SDT which specifies that when individuals engage in activities that make them feel competent and self-determined, their intrinsic motivation is likely to increase, but when individuals feel incompetent or controlled by external factors, their intrinsic motivation is likely to decrease (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The CET also emphasizes how autonomy-supportive environments (where individuals have choices, acknowledge their feelings, and pressure and control is minimized) facilitate intrinsic motivation. When individuals feel that their autonomy is supported, they are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation and engage in activities willingly. In contrast, controlling environments that pressure individuals to think, feel, or behave in specific ways can undermine intrinsic motivation and lead to negative outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Similarly, the Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) addresses extrinsic motivation forms and factors promoting internalization and integration of behavior regulations. The OIT proposes that relatedness, competence, and autonomy support facilitate internalization and integrated,

autonomous regulation which is associated with better outcomes (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Williams & Deci, 1996). Importantly, students with deep intrinsic motivation and a desire to improve often have a stronger academic identity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As motivation is commonly understood as the driving factor behind behaviour, this study recognizes the importance in applying this concept to the formation of student-athlete identity to establish an informed understanding of the mechanisms behind student-athlete identity development.

The role of social support among student athletes

Social support in sports is multidimensional, including emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support, and relates to better performance and well-being (Rees & Hardy, 2004). Perceived emotional and informational support has stress-buffering effects (Freeman & Rees, 2010). Support from teammates is associated with mental health, motivation to continue playing, and need satisfaction, while the coach-athlete relationship and positive support from the coach are linked to mental well-being and confidence which are related to performance (Felton & Jowett, 2017; Hagiwara et al., 2017; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Raube & Zakrajsek, 2017). Evidently, previous research has found that social support positively impacts athletes. Therefore, this impact must be assessed among student-athletes to establish if this positive impact translates to athletes with dual student-athlete identities, which this study seeks to accomplish.

Summary, objectives and hypotheses

Previous research highlights the difficulties elite student-athletes face in balancing academic and athletic demands, often with inadequate support (Boyle, 2023; Saunders, 2021). While countries such as the United States, New Zealand, and Canada provide formalised assistance to support the dual careers of student-athletes, many regions—including Europe, Asia, and Africa—lack consistent, organized support systems (Condello et al., 2019; Gomez et al., 2018). In particular, research reveals disparities in policy implementation, with the Irish system remaining vague compared to the NCAA in the U.S. and other European nations with more structured legislation and defined programmes (Bourke, 2020; NCAA, 2023). This makes the Irish context especially important to study, as elite student-athletes in Ireland must navigate their dual roles without the comprehensive institutional support available in other countries (Guidotti et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2023). Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how the intersection of academic and athletic responsibilities shapes the identity of elite student-athletes in Ireland and for developing tailored policies and interventions.

This study aims to investigate the relationship between academic and athletic identities among elite student-athletes in Ireland, with a particular focus on how external factors such as motivation and social support influence these identities. By exploring their dual roles, this research provides insights into the unique challenges faced by student-athletes in Irish tertiary education, contributing to both academic and athletic domains. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Do participants report higher levels of athletic identity or academic identity? It is hypothesised that participants will report higher athletic identity than academic identity.

2. Do motivation and social support predict higher student-athlete identity? It is hypothesised that personal motivation and social support will predict higher student-athlete identity.

METHOD

Participants

This study focused on "high performance" elite student athletes in Irish tertiary education. Out of 246,299 third-level students in Ireland, approximately 6% (14,778) are considered elite student athletes (Higher Education Authority, 2023; Murphy et al., 2018). The sample was drawn from 10 of 46 Irish third-level institutions using non-probability purposive sampling to ensure eligibility (see Table 1). OpenEpi Software (Version 3.01) determined that a sample size of 96 participants was required (Qualtrics, 2024), considering the population size and a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Elite athletes competing at regional, national, or international level.	Students above or below 18 to 25 years of age.
	Declined to provide consent to participate.
Students currently enrolled at tertiary education full time.	Students not competing at regional, national, or international level.
Between 18 to 25 years of age.	Students not on an elite athlete scholarship programme.

Recruitment notices were disseminated to sports tutors and college administrators, resulting in a sample of 100 participants from various sports and competitive levels. Table 2 presents a breakdown of participants by region and program type, and Table 3 provides details on participants' year of study and the institutions they attended.

Table 2. Demographic breakdown of participants by region and programme type

Category	Subcategory	N	%
Region	South	38	38%
	West	35	35%
	East	19	19%
	North/Online	8	8%
Programme Type	Level 8 (Honours Bachelor's degree)	80	80%
	Level 9 (Master's degree)	13	13%
	Level 7 (Ordinary Bachelor's degree)	5	5%
	Other (Online degree)	2	2%

Table 3. Year of study and tertiary education institutions attended by participants

Variables	Level 7 n (%)	Level 8 n (%)	Level 9 n (%)	Other n (%)
Year of Study				
1st year	0 (0%)	26 (26%)	4 (4%)	0 (0%)
2nd year	3 (3%)	16 (16%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
3rd year	2 (2%)	19 (19%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
4th year	0 (0%)	18 (18%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
5th year	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	7 (7%)	0 (0%)
6th year	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Tertiary Institution				
Atlantic Technological University	1 (1%)	12 (12%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Dublin City University	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Maynooth University	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
National College of Ireland	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
South East Technological University	0 (0%)	7 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Trinity College Dublin	1 (1%)	6 (6%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)
Technological University Dublin	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Technological University of the Shannon	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
University College Cork	1 (1%)	13 (13%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
University College Dublin	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
University of Galway	0 (0%)	19 (19%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)
University of Limerick	1 (1%)	9 (9%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Ulster University	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Other	0 (0%)	7 (7%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)

All sport types included in the survey were reported by at least one participant, with some participants also reporting additional sport types that were not included in the survey. Most participants ($n = 51$; 51%) engaged in a sport associated with the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) including hurling, football, camogie, and ladies' football. Many participants also engaged in rugby ($n = 19$; 19%) or soccer ($n = 11$; 11%), while others ($n = 14$; 14%) engaged in less common sports among the sample. Importantly, several participants ($n = 5$; 5%) reported engaging in 'Other' sports, including clay pigeon shooting, dancing, kickboxing, and weightlifting.

When asked what athletic level participants perceived themselves at, most ($n = 62$, 62%) reported perceiving themselves as "amateur", followed by ($n = 37$, 37%) perceived themselves as "semi-professional", and only one (1%) perceived themselves as "professional". Concerning the level of competition, most participants reported competing at the All-Ireland Level (Senior; $n = 50$, 50%), or university championships ($n = 45$; 45%). The fewest number of participants competed in Olympic Games ($n = 1$; 1%). Of note, participants could select multiple levels of competition. See Table 3 for participants' sport types categorized by athletic level.

Table 3. Participants' Sport Type Categorized by Athletic Level

Variable	Amateur *n* (%)	Semi-professional *n* (%)	Professional *n* (%)
GAA (Hurling)	15 (15%)	9 (9%)	0 (0%)
GAA (Football)	6 (6%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)
GAA (Camogie)	4 (4%)	6 (6%)	0 (0%)
GAA (Ladies Football)	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)
Soccer	6 (6%)	5 (5%)	0 (0%)
Athletics	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Rugby	15 (15%)	3 (3%)	1 (1%)
Tennis	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Boxing	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Cricket	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Karate/ Martial Arts	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Handball	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Cycling	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)
Other	2 (2%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)

Measures

Each of the study variables were assessed in the survey using pre-established questionnaires. The survey combined questionnaires including the Academic and Athletic Identity Scale (AAIS; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014), Short Academic Motivation Scale (SAMS; Kotera et al., 2020), Sport Motivation Scale (Mallett et al., 2007), and the Interpersonal Support Evaluation Lust-12 (ISEL-12; Cohen et al., 1985). Participants' demographic information was also assessed in the survey.

Academic and athletic identity

The Academic and Athletic Identity Scale (AAIS; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014) was used to assess students' perceived academic and athletic identities. The AAIS is an 11-item Likert measure with two subscales (i.e., academic and athletic identity) with responses ranging from one ('Not central to my sense of self') to six ('Very central to my sense of self'). A total score was collected for both subscales, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived identity. A Cronbach's test demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.754$).

Academic motivation

The Short Academic Motivation Scale (Kotera et al., 2020) was used to assess academic motivation. The SAMS is a 14-item Likert measure with seven subscales with responses ranging from one ('Does not correspond at all') to seven ('Corresponds exactly'). A total score was collected, with higher scores representing greater academic motivation. A Cronbach's test demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.814$).

Athletic motivation

The Sport Motivation Scale (Mallett et al., 2007) was used to assess athletic motivation. The SMS is a 28-item Likert measure with six subscales with responses ranging from one ('Does not correspond at all') to seven ('Corresponds exactly'). A total score was collected, with higher scores representing greater athletic motivation. Importantly, Cronbach's test demonstrated poor reliability ($\alpha = 0.684$).

Social support

The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List- 12 (Cohen et al., 1985) was used to assess perceived social support. The ISEL-12 is a 12-item Likert measure with three subscales with responses ranging from one ('Definitely false') to four ('Definitely true'). A total score was collected, with higher scores representing greater perceived social support. Of note, a Cronbach's test demonstrated poor reliability ($\alpha = 0.531$).

Procedure

The Open University ethical review board granted approval for the current cross-sectional study. After obtaining approval, college authorities and sports department representatives at selected tertiary institutions were contacted and provided with recruitment materials. These materials included information sheets outlining the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and details regarding anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were recruited through a convenience sampling method, using registered lists of athletes provided by institutions and sports organisations, as well as personal networks. Eligible participants had to be actively involved in regional, national, or international-level sports and enrolled as full-time students in tertiary education. Informed consent was obtained electronically, ensuring voluntary participation without monetary compensation.

Data were collected using a cross-sectional design through an online survey administered via the Qualtrics platform. The survey took participants approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete and was structured to ensure minimal disruption to their academic or athletic

commitments. The survey included sections on academic and athletic identities, motivation, and social support, using validated instruments. All responses were anonymised, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the data collection process. The survey period spanned four weeks, from March to April 2024, allowing participants sufficient time to engage at their convenience. Regular reminders were sent via email to encourage participation. The study adhered to ethical guidelines set by the Open University ethics committee, including protocols for data handling and confidentiality.

Data analysis

The data collected through the Qualtrics platform was imported into SPSS Version 25.0 for analysis. Data cleaning was conducted to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the dataset (Austin et al., 2014). This involved handling missing data points and identifying outliers using Z-scores. Outliers that could potentially skew the results were removed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, providing a measure of the reliability of the scales used in the survey. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to summarise the characteristics of the dataset and provide an overview of participants' responses (Cresswell, 2009). To test the study's hypotheses, frequency analyses and multiple linear regression analyses were employed. Frequency analyses were used to explore the distribution of key variables such as academic and athletic identity, while regression analyses were conducted to assess the influence of external factors like motivation and social support on these identities. All relevant assumptions for regression analyses, such as normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity, were checked to ensure the appropriateness of the statistical tests. The tests used for assumption verification are described below.

Assumption testing

Hypothesis one was tested using frequency analyses which required data to be independent. Data was ensured to be independent due to the random sampling methodology employed.

Hypothesis two was tested using multiple linear regression analyses. Several tests were completed to ensure assumptions were met prior to conducting the analyses. Primarily, tests of collinearity indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern when testing athletic motivation (Athletic motivation, Tolerance = 0.971, VIF = 1.030; social support, Tolerance = 0.971, VIF = 1.030) and academic motivation (academic motivation, Tolerance = 1.00, VIF = 1.00; social

support, Tolerance = 1.00, VIF = 1.00). Next, the Durbin-Watson variable indicated that the data met the assumption of independent errors for athletic identity (1.532) and academic identity (1.731). Finally, histograms and P-P plots of standardized residuals indicated that the data contained approximately normally distributed errors and scatterplots of standardised residuals indicated that the data met the assumptions of homogeneity of variance and linearity.

FINDINGS

Participants' perceptions of their academic and athletic identities

It was hypothesised that participants would report higher athletic identity than academic identity. A frequency analysis showed that, contrary to the hypothesis, slightly more participants ($n = 42$; 42%) identified as student-athletes compared to athlete-students ($n = 39$; 39%), while some ($n = 19$; 19%) perceived their identities as equal (as seen in Figure 1). Despite the similar proportion of participants who reported stronger identity with their "student-athlete" and "athlete-student" identities, most participants ($n = 65$; 65%) reported that their studies were more important than their athletic careers.
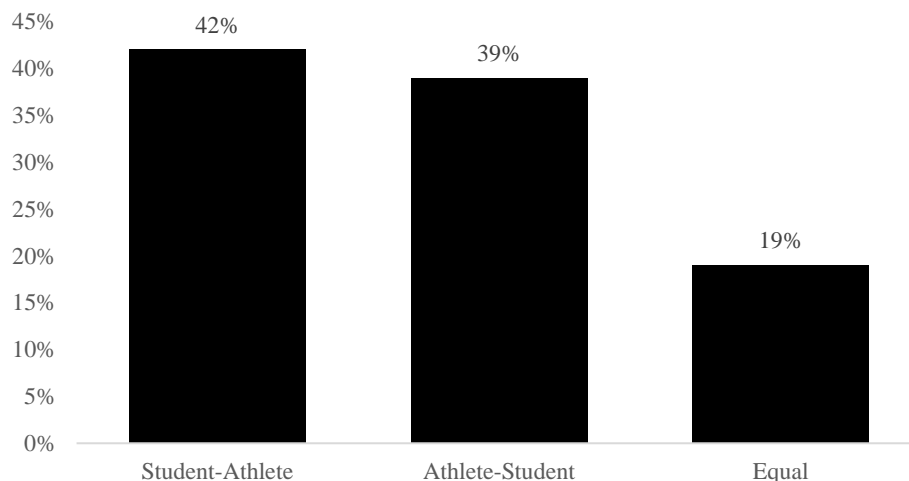

Figure 1. Participants' self-perceived identities

The impact of motivation and social support on identity

The impact of academic motivation and social support on academic identity

It was hypothesized that motivation and social support would predict higher academic identity. A multiple regression analysis was conducted, with the overall model being statistically significant, $F(2, 97) = 26.310$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 35.2% of the variance in academic identity ($R^2 = 0.352$). Academic motivation significantly predicted academic identity, $\beta = 0.279$, SE = 0.038, $t = 7.254$, $p < 0.001$, CI [0.203, 0.355], while social support did not, $\beta = -0.005$, SE = 0.084, $t = -0.056$, $p = 0.955$, CI [-0.171, 0.162]. Thus, the hypothesis was partially

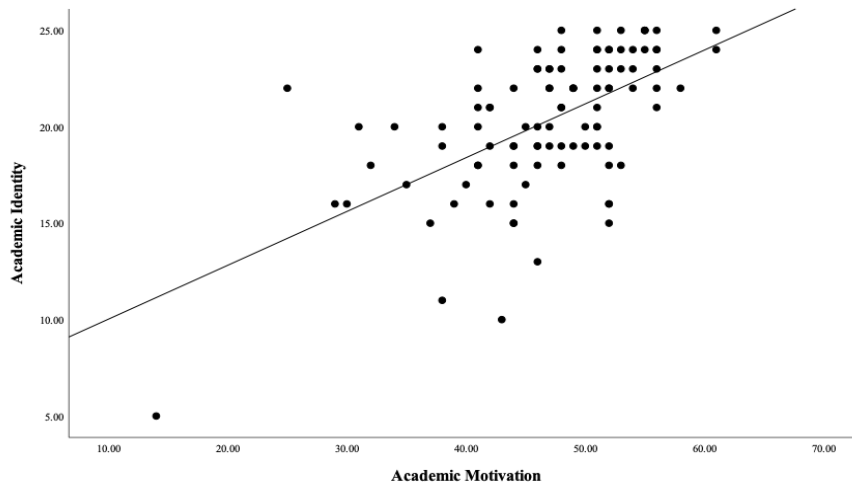supported, with academic motivation predicting academic identity, but not social support (see Figures 4 & 5).

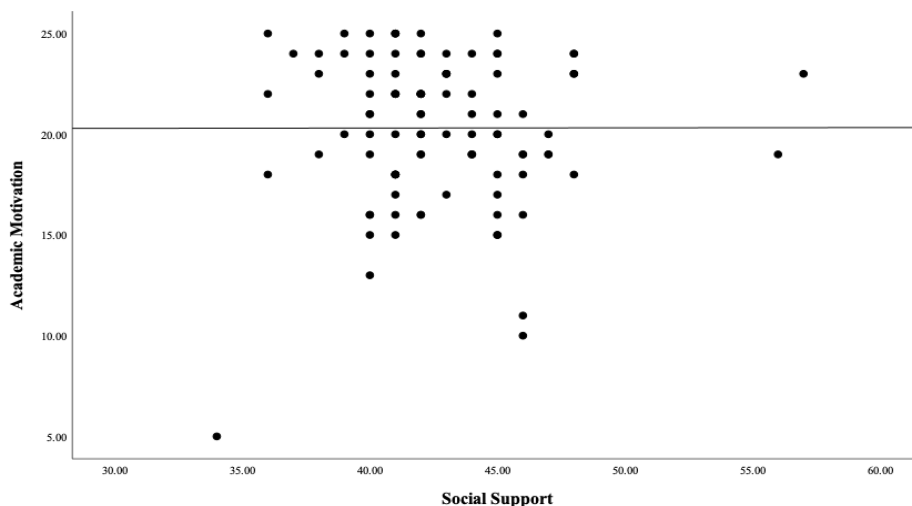**Figure 4. The relationship between academic motivation on academic identity**

Figure 5. The relationship between social support and academic identity

The impact of athletic motivation and social support on athletic identity

It was hypothesized that motivation and social support would predict higher athletic identity. A multiple regression analysis was conducted, with the overall model being statistically significant, $F(2, 97) = 13.187$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 21.4% of the variance in athletic identity ($R^2 = 0.214$). Athletic motivation significantly predicted athletic identity, $\beta = 0.124$, SE = 0.024, $t = 5.064$, $p < 0.001$, CI [0.075, 0.173], while social support did not, $\beta = -0.003$, SE = 0.098, $t = -0.029$, $p = 0.977$, CI [-0.198, 0.192]. Thus, the hypothesis was partially

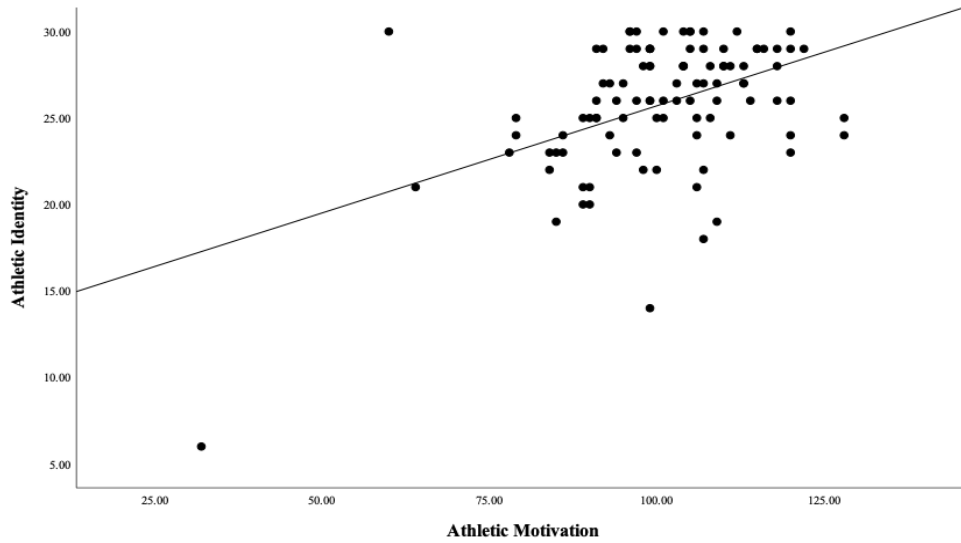supported, with athletic motivation predicting athletic identity, but not social support (see Figures 6 & 7).

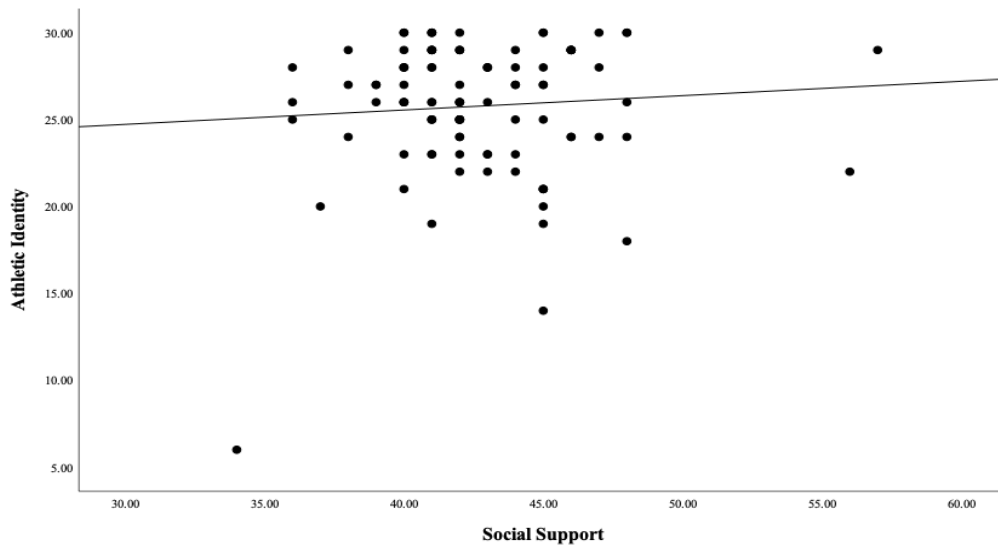**Figure 6. The relationship between athletic motivation on athletic identity**

Figure 7. The relationship between social support and athletic identity

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored the complex interplay between academic and athletic identities and the influence of motivation and social support on these identities among elite student-athletes in Irish tertiary education. The findings provide valuable insights into the dynamics of identity formation contributing to a deeper understanding of students' unique experiences and the factors that shape their success in both academic and athletic domains.

Academic and athletic identities among elite student athletes in Ireland

It was hypothesised that participants would report higher levels of athletic identity than academic identity. Contrary to the hypothesis, supported by existing literature which suggested that elite athletes often prioritise their athletic roles (Antshel et al., 2016; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Yuhkymenko-Lescroart, 2014), this research found that slightly more participants identified as student-athletes compared to athlete-students. Additionally, most participants reported that their academic pursuits were more important than their athletic careers, echoing recent findings from studies conducted in other European contexts (Anderson, 2023; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019), which suggest that academic identity might be gaining more prominence among student-athletes in regions with less structured athletic career support. This finding challenges the notion that student-athletes universally place greater emphasis on their athletic roles (Steele &Ashley, 2020; Wylleman, Rosier, & De Knop, 2015). One possible explanation is the growing academic pressure in Irish tertiary education, which may compel students to focus more on their studies (Jigsaw, 2022). Previous research indicates that students in countries with less formalised dual career support (such as Ireland) often experience greater academic demands, which can lead to a stronger academic identity (Aquilina, 2013; Saunders, 2021). This highlights the need for further research to understand why elite student-athletes in Ireland might prioritise their student identity more than their athletic identity compared to their counterparts in countries like the U.S. or Canada (Parker et al., 2023; Cartigny et al., 2021).

The impact of motivation and social support on student-athlete identity

It was hypothesised that personal motivation and social support would predict higher student-athlete identity. In partial support of the hypothesis, multiple regression analyses indicated that while personal motivation significantly predicted academic and athletic identity, social support did not. This finding is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2017), which emphasises the importance of intrinsic motivation in shaping identity. Previous studies (Uğraş et al., 2024; López De Subijana et al., 2015) have similarly found that motivation is a key factor in the development of student-athlete identity. The significant role of motivation suggests that nurturing intrinsic motivation among student-athletes is crucial for helping them develop a well-balanced sense of self, as demonstrated in other contexts (Sedlacek, 2017; Rufer & Love, 2021). This finding has practical implications for coaches, educators, and support staff, who should aim to create environments that encourage autonomy and intrinsic motivation, similar to the interventions recommended in studies of student-athletes in North America and Europe (Felton & Jowett, 2017; Rees et al., 2007).

The non-significant role of social support in predicting identity diverges from previous findings by Hagiwara et al. (2021) and Raabe & Zakrajsek (2017), where social support was found to play a more prominent role. This unexpected result may be due to the complex nature of social support and the varying ways in which it is perceived and utilised by individuals (Parker et al., 2021; DeFreese & Smith, 2014). It is possible that the quality, source, or type of social support plays a more significant role than the mere presence of support as noted in work by Freeman & Rees (2010) and Russell, (2021). Future research could explore these nuances in greater detail, examining how different types and sources of social support influence identity formation, particularly in contexts with varying levels of formal support for student-athletes. Comparing findings across countries with differing levels of institutional support (e.g., NCAA systems vs. European models) would provide deeper insights into how support structures affect identity formation (Stambulova et al., 2015; Steele & Ashley, 2020).

Limitations

Although there was considerable diversity in the sample, participants were only recruited from 10 of 46 tertiary institutions in Ireland, thus resulting in most institutions in Ireland being excluded. As such, the generalisability of the results to the overall population of tertiary level students in Ireland is limited. As such, future research should seek to recruit participants from more institutions across Ireland. Similarly, all the participants were from the Republic of Ireland, thus eliminating the applicability of these results to students in Northern Ireland. Therefore, future research should be conducted using a sample inclusive of students from Northern Ireland, to identify differences and similarities between elite student athletes in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, the vast majority of participants were completing Bachelor's degrees, thus limiting the results pertaining to the experiences of students completing Master, PhD, or other degrees. This highlights the need to conduct research with a more diverse sample to ensure the experiences of student-athletes of various academic-levels are considered. Finally, this study did not assess the impact of gender on identity formation, motivation, or social support, giving rise to questions regarding the influence of gender among student-athletes. As such, future research should take a gender-responsive approach to determine if students of different genders have varied experiences and perceptions.

In conclusion, this study revealed the complex interplay between academic and athletic identities among elite student-athletes in Ireland and emphasised the critical role of intrinsic motivation in shaping these identities. Contrary to traditional views, the findings showed a stronger identification with academic roles, suggesting a shift in priorities among this

population. From a practical standpoint, institutions should focus on fostering intrinsic motivation and providing tailored support programs, such as mentorship and flexible academic scheduling, to help student-athletes balance their dual roles. The study also highlighted the need for further research into the nuances of social support, particularly its varying effects on identity development. Future studies should investigate the effectiveness of targeted interventions aimed at promoting a more holistic balance between academic and athletic success, with implications for student-athletes' well-being and long-term career development.

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KATKI ORANI *CONTRIBUTION RATE*	AÇIKLAMA *EXPLANATION*	KATKIDA BULUNANLAR *CONTRIBUTORS*
Fikir ve Kavramsal Örgü *Idea or Notion*	Araştırma hipotezini veya fikrini oluşturmak *Form the research hypothesis or idea*	Conor WHELAN
Tasarım *Design*	Yöntem ve araştırma desenini tasarlamak *To design the method and research design.*	Conor WHELAN
Literatür Tarama *Literature Review*	Çalışma için gerekli literatürü taramak *Review the literature required for the study*	Conor WHELAN
Veri Toplama ve İşleme *Data Collecting and Processing*	Verileri toplamak, düzenlemek ve raporlaştırmak *Collecting, organizing and reporting data*	Conor WHELAN
Tartışma ve Yorum *Discussion and Commentary*	Elde edilen bulguların değerlendirilmesi *Evaluation of the obtained finding*	Conor WHELAN Alan YATES

Destek ve Teşekkür Beyanı/ *Statement of Support and Acknowledgment*

Bu çalışmanın yazım sürecinde katkı ve/veya destek alınmamıştır.

No contribution and/or support was received during the writing process of this study.

Çatışma Beyanı/ *Statement of Conflict*

Araştırmacıların araştırma ile ilgili diğer kişi ve kurumlarla herhangi bir kişisel ve finansal çıkar çatışması yoktur.

Researchers do not have any personal or financial conflicts of interest with other people and institutions related to the research.

Etik Kurul Beyanı/ *Statement of Ethics Committee*

Bu araştırma, Open Üniversitesi Etik Kurulu'nun 16.02.2024 tarihli D811 sayılı kararı ile yürütülmüştür.

This research was conducted with the decision of The Open University Ethics Committee dated 16.02.2024 and numbered D811.