

## Digital Identity Formation Among Generation Z in Turkey: A Mixed-Methods Study in Manuel Castells' Network Society

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how social media shapes the digital identities of Generation Z in Turkey, using Manuel Castells' Network Society theory as a framework. The study tested two hypotheses: (1) social media influences digital self-representation; (2) social approval through likes and comments increases self-esteem and social acceptance. A mixed-methods approach was used: a structured questionnaire captured quantitative data, while open-ended questions were employed to explore participants' experiences and perspectives as qualitative data. The survey involved 71 students from the Faculty of Communication at Kocaeli University, selected purposively for their active social media use. Quantitative data, collected through a structured questionnaire, revealed that the use of social media has no significant effect on digital self-representation ( $p = 0.708$ ), contrary to the hypothesis. However, online social validation through likes and comments has a significant effect on self-esteem ( $p < 0.01$ ). Qualitative data further revealed that participants actively curate idealized versions of themselves on social media, balancing authenticity with aspirations. Many expressed how likes and comments directly influence their confidence and sense of belonging. This study provides insight into the empowering aspects as well as the challenges of social media, emphasizing the need for digital literacy to manage its psychological impact. These findings provide important insights into the role of social media in identity formation, as well as offering recommendations for the world of education, mental health professionals, and policymakers.

**Keywords:** *Generation Z, identity formation, network society, social validation, Turkey.*

### INTRODUCTION

Social media has become integral to Generation Z's lives, influencing nearly every aspect of their social and personal interactions. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter provide spaces where individuals can express themselves digitally, shaping and projecting the identity they wish to present (Gorea, 2021). This process, known as digital self-representation, allows Generation Z to selectively highlight certain aspects of themselves (Fernández & Daimiel, 2024), whether through images, text, or other online interactions. Unlike previous generations who engaged more in face-to-face interactions, Generation Z relies heavily on social media to shape self-perception and project their desired image, introducing a new dynamic where self-identity is shaped not only by immediate social circles but also by global expectations and online standards (Laor, 2022; Wilska et al., 2023).

In Turkey, Generation Z's identity formation is shaped by the blend of traditional values and digital experiences on social media. While cultural heritage plays a role, influencers on social media have a greater impact on their self-perception and validation than family, religion, or

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cultural education during adolescence (Dalayli, 2023). This shift underscores the growing influence of digital figures in shaping their identities. Generation Z in Turkey navigates a landscape where cultural norms coexist with digital platforms, using social media to connect with peers and satisfy cognitive and social needs.

Although previous studies on digital identity have offered important insights, many rely on frameworks that prioritize individual-level explanations such as self-presentation, impression management, and psychosocial identity development (Boyd, 2015; Goffman, 1959; Yang & Brown, 2016). While useful, they are limited in explaining how identity formation is increasingly shaped by the architecture of digital platforms and the relational dynamics of global online networks. In other words, traditional theories do not fully capture how identities today emerge within interconnected, technology-driven environments. Therefore, this study turns to Castells' Network Society theory, which offers a more comprehensive lens for understanding identity as a product of ongoing participation in digital networks.

In Castells' view of the network society, identity is shaped through participation in digital networks, where individuals engage in continuous interactions via technology (Miconi, 2023). For Generation Z in Turkey, social media serves as a central platform where identity is not only formed through local cultural norms but is also influenced by global digital connections. These networks provide young people the opportunity to express diverse aspects of their identity, allowing them to negotiate between traditional cultural values and modern, individualistic expressions. The digital platforms thus become spaces where identities are fluid and adaptable, constantly influenced by both local and global networked interactions.

Interactions on social media are often filled with mechanisms of social validation, such as the number of likes, comments, and followers a user accumulates (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Sherman et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2014). Generation Z, who grew up with constant digital connectivity, is particularly susceptible to online social validation, where they feel a strong need to gain recognition and approval from their digital audience. This reliance on validation affects how they see themselves and motivates them to adjust their digital self-projection constantly. This dynamic results in a more fluid and flexible sense of identity, where Generation Z can create online personas that may differ from their offline selves. In Turkey, this duality is even more pronounced as young people balance cultural expectations with the desire to express a modern, individualistic identity on global platforms (Neyzi, 2001; Özbay et al., 2023).

Influencers play a critical role in shaping Generation Z's opinions, behaviours, and aspirations (Dalayli, 2023), particularly within Turkey, where influencers often blend modernity and traditional values. This combination resonates with young audiences who seek figures reflecting their cultural heritage and contemporary lifestyle aspirations (Nada et al., 2022). Influencers thus reinforce Generation Z's approach to identity, as they prefer to align with brands and personalities that embody values consistent with their own. This influence extends to consumer behaviour, as young people often look to influencers for lifestyle guidance that aligns with both their modern aspirations and cultural values.

While social media offers ample opportunities for self-expression and community building, it also introduces challenges, such as social media addiction and the *fear of missing out* (FOMO), which can negatively impact mental health. Generation Z may experience heightened anxiety and strained relationships as they navigate the pressures of maintaining an online presence and

validating their self-worth through virtual feedback (Blackwell et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the ability to manage and curate their digital identities allows them to align with both peer expectations and broader societal norms, underlining the role of social media in their personal development (Yang & Brown, 2016).

Social validation is integral to identity construction for Generation Z, as peer approval significantly influences their sense of belonging and self-esteem. Pursuing validation through likes and comments creates a feedback loop that reinforces online behaviours and shapes self-perception (Rahman et al., 2024; Sabik et al., 2020; Yue & Tang, 2024). This process can lead to heightened anxiety and dissatisfaction, as young individuals may feel pressured to measure up to idealized images of success and beauty frequently portrayed on social media, leading to issues of social comparison (Kross et al., 2013).

Generation Z in Turkey faces challenges in balancing cultural expectations and social norms with the desire to project a modern and individualistic image on social media. They often build relationships through social media, reflecting the integration of traditional social structures and digital interactions (Tari-Kasnakoğlu et al., 2020). Furthermore, a sensitivity to sustainability and sustainable tourism demonstrates a digital identity that respects local traditions while engaging with global trends (Görpe & Öksüz, 2022). However, seeking social validation on social media also carries risks. The rise of "cancel culture" forces Generation Z to be cautious in expressing themselves, hampering their authenticity. This balance between self-expression and public scrutiny raises an important question: how do these digital dynamics influence self-identity formation?

This study begins by examining how social media platforms influence self-identity formation in Generation Z, specifically within the context of Castells' concept of a network society. By exploring the role of social validation mechanisms and self-representation practices, this study aims to uncover how digital spaces shape a dynamic and evolving sense of identity. These findings will contribute to sociological and psychological understanding of identity construction in the digital age, offer insights for education and mental health professionals promoting healthy digital habits, and provide data-driven recommendations for policymakers and social media platforms to foster supportive environments that encourage authentic self-expression. Based on these objectives, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Social media usage significantly affects generation z's digital self-representation in Turkey.

**H2:** Online social validation through likes and comments has a significant impact on online social validation and self-confidence of generation z in Turkey.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Network Society*

The concept of network society, as articulated by Manuel Castells, represents a transformative shift in understanding social organization in the digital age. Castells' exploration of the network society, particularly in his seminal work *The Rise of the Network Society*, has dramatically influenced sociological discourse by arguing that contemporary society is increasingly organized around networks, fundamentally reshaping traditional social structures and interactions. Castells distinguishes between the "information society" and the "network society", the latter characterized by social forms organized around networks of information and communication

technologies (ICTs), which impact the dynamics of power, production, and cultural life (Castells, 2003; Qiu, 2008). This distinction highlights that network society is not just a by-product of technological advances but also a new social morphology that shapes human experiences and relationships, creating new possibilities and challenges for identity and social validation among Generation Z.

In a network society, social media platforms serve as virtual spaces where Generation Z engages in digital self-representation and seeks online social validation. Castells emphasizes that these networks are not just technological constructs but also embedded in social practices and power dynamics that influence how individuals, especially Generation Z, construct and project their identities globally (Castells, 2007). The rise of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have been examples of this network-based social organization, giving Generation Z the tools to create digital personas and measure their social value through mechanisms such as likes, comments and followers.

For Generation Z, this digital landscape encourages the creation of flexible network-based identities that are constantly reinforced or challenged by online feedback. Castells' "identity project" concept describes how young individuals navigate their self-concept in response to existing social narratives, balancing personal identity formation with global norms and expectations found online (Castells, 2009; Hudaeva & Pratama, 2023). In addition, network societies encourage decentralized forms of organization, distributing power and authority across different nodes rather than centralizing it hierarchically (Miconi, 2023). This structure empowers Generation Z to express unique identities and engage in collective movements that align with their values, fostering a sense of community that transcends local affiliations (Castells, 2010). However, this global connectivity exerts new pressures to conform to standards shaped by the vast reach of digital networks, leaving many to experience tensions between their authentic selves and the identities projected online.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### *Digital Self-Representation ( $X_1$ )*

Digital self-representation reflects how individuals construct identities through the content they choose to share. Identity within a network society is dynamic and continually reshaped through interaction with online audiences (Castells, 2007). This process aligns with the phenomenon of "context collapse," where multiple audiences merge, requiring individuals to balance authenticity with social expectations (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Yao et al., 2023). For Generation Z, self-representation often involves blending personal expression with idealized projections shaped by global digital culture (Drummond, 2021).

### *Online Social Validation ( $X_2$ )*

Online social validation represents feedback mechanisms that influence how individuals perceive themselves. Empirical studies show that positive feedback boosts confidence (Burrow & Rainone, 2017), while limited validation intensifies social comparison and psychological strain (Kross et al., 2013; Vannucci et al., 2017). Recognition within digital networks is integral to identity formation, as individuals increasingly rely on audience responses to anchor self-worth (Castells, 2009).

Algorithms further amplify this cycle by rewarding content that gains early engagement, deepening the role of validation in digital identity processes (Balick, 2023; Ugwu et al., 2023).

### *Self-identity (Y)*

Self-identity reflects how individuals perceive and understand themselves both online and offline, encompassing consistency, comfort in self-expression, and the influence of social media on daily behavior. For Generation Z, online interactions provide feedback that shapes self-understanding and offers opportunities to experiment with identity while maintaining a sense of authenticity (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Vogel et al., 2014). These experiences highlight the dynamic negotiation between digital self-presentation and real-life identity, illustrating the complex interplay of reflection, feedback, and personal growth in identity formation (Castells, 2010).

## METHODOLOGY

### *a. Research Design*

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to explore the relationship between social media use, digital self-representation, and online social validation among Generation Z in Turkey. The quantitative aspect follows a cross-sectional survey design based on a positivistic framework, allowing for the measurement of variables like social media intensity and validation patterns. This design helps identify trends and correlations that are statistically significant across a large sample (Bryman, 2016; Neuman, 2014). In addition to quantitative analysis, the study includes qualitative insights gathered through open-ended questions in the survey. These questions provide respondents with an opportunity to describe their experiences and perspectives, enriching the data with contextual and social nuances. This integration of quantitative and qualitative methods offers a more comprehensive understanding of how Generation Z interacts with digital networks to construct and validate their identities (Neuman, 2014).

### *b. Populations and Sample*

This study was conducted at Kocaeli University, Turkey, with a population of 2,837 students from the Faculty of Communication Sciences. A total of 71 students were selected through purposive sampling, following the recommendations of Cresswell (2007) and Etikan (2016), to ensure participants met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Selection focused on students from the same faculty and programs related to communication studies, ensuring substantial exposure to social media and digital platforms. Representativeness was further strengthened by including only students actively engaged in social media activities, such as liking, commenting, or uploading content on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, with accounts verified prior to participation. Additionally, qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions to provide deeper insights into how social media shapes self-representation. Together, these strategies compensated for the relatively small sample size, ensuring the data remained meaningful, reliable, and capable of capturing both quantitative patterns and rich, subjective narratives regarding the digital behaviors and identity formation of Generation Z.

In accordance with ethical standards, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation. The participants were assured that their data would be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes, with no personal identifiers included in the study results.

*c. Data Collection*

Data for this study were collected through a structured questionnaire developed based on the concept of Network Society theory. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms and consisted of four sections: digital self-representation, online social validation, participation in digital networks, and self-perception on social media versus real life. All four sections used a 5-point Likert scale to measure participants' attitudes and behaviors, and the final section also included two open-ended questions designed to explore participants' perceptions in greater depth. To ensure broad participation, the questionnaire was distributed through classroom visits and WhatsApp groups, combining direct interaction and digital communication channels to minimize technical and geographical barriers. To clarify how each variable was operationalized and measured, Table 1 presents the complete list of variables along with their corresponding questionnaire items.

Table 1: Operationalization of research variables

Variable	Item Questions	Scale
Digital Self-Representation (X1)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. I use social media to show who I am to others.</li><li>2. Social media allows me to be more creative in expressing myself.</li><li>3. I select the content I upload to match the self-image I want to present.</li><li>4. Social media helps me present the best side of myself.</li><li>5. I build a different self-image on social media compared to real life.</li><li>6. I find it easier to connect with people on social media than in real life.</li><li>7. Social media helps me form my identity based on the groups or communities I follow online.</li></ol>	Likert 1–5
Online Social Validation (X2)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. I feel more confident when my posts receive many “likes” or positive comments.</li><li>2. Other people’s reactions to my posts affect how I see myself.</li><li>3. It is important for me to receive recognition from my online friends.</li><li>4. I tend to delete posts if they do not receive many responses.</li><li>5. I often compare the number of “likes” or comments I get with others.</li><li>6. I feel part of certain communities based on my interactions on social media.</li></ol>	Likert 1–5
Self-Identity (Y)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. My identity on social media is the same as in real life.</li><li>2. I feel more comfortable expressing myself on social media than in real life.</li><li>3. Social media influences how I act and interact in daily life.</li><li>4. I often receive feedback from others about who I am through social media.</li><li>5. My online interactions help me understand myself better.</li><li>6. Online connectedness influences how I see the world and myself</li></ol>	Likert 1–5

Open-ended questions	1. How do you feel social media influences the way you perceive and present yourself to others? 2. In your opinion, to what extent does social validation on social media affect your self-confidence?	Narrative/ descriptive
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Source: Questionnaire by author

*d. Data Analysis*

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 27) through validity and reliability testing, descriptive statistics, and regression analysis to identify structural relationships among the variables X1, X2, X3, and Y, which were extracted directly from Castells’ Network Society theory. These variables were operationalized into questionnaire items to measure digital self-representation, social validation, network participation, and networked identity. Meanwhile, qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed using (Braun & Clarke, 2006) thematic analysis, where coding and theme development remained theoretically guided by Castells’ concepts to ensure coherence between the quantitative constructs and qualitative narratives. Integration of both datasets occurred in the discussion: quantitative results first established significant patterns, and qualitative insights were then used to explain, contextualize, and deepen these statistical relationships. Thus, qualitative narratives served as interpretive bridges that clarified how the mechanisms described by participants aligned with or expanded the quantitative findings regarding identity formation within digital networks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Result*

*a. Demographic Data*

The demographic analysis provides an overview of the participants' characteristics, offering insights into digital behaviors and identity formation in the networked society. The gender distribution shows a balanced representation, with 57.7% female and 42.3% male participants. Most participants (59.2%) are between 21–23 years old, followed by those aged 26 and above (16.9%), 17–20 years (12.7%), and below 17 years (11.3%). This suggests that the majority are university students transitioning into professional life. See Table 5 below for the detailed age and gender distribution.

Table 2: Distribution of demographic data of research participants

Category	Percentage
Gender	
Female	57.7%
Male	42.3%
Age	
21–23 years	59.2%
26 years and above	16.9%
17–20 years	12.7%
Below 17 years	11.3%

### b. Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms

Among social media platforms, as shown in Figure 1, Instagram is the most preferred by participants (77.5%). TikTok ranks second with 12.7%, followed by Twitter (5.6%), YouTube (1.4%), and Spotify (1.4%) as less frequently used platforms. This indicates that Instagram is the leading platform for digital interaction among the younger generation.

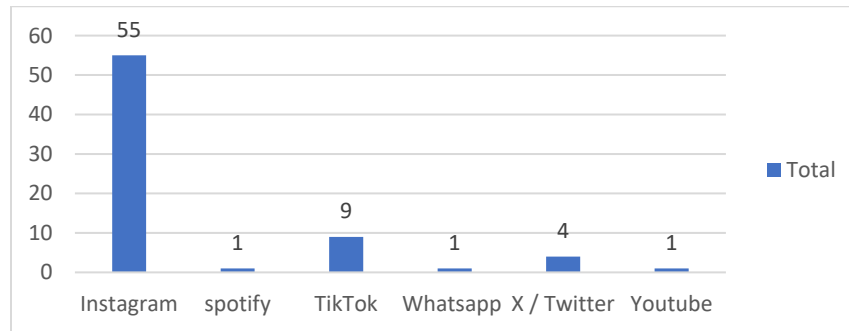


Figure 1: Most frequently used media

### c. Duration of Social Media Use

The majority of participants (39.4%) use social media for 3–4 hours daily. This is followed by 31% who use it for 1–2 hours daily. Those who use social media for more than 4 hours daily constitute 19.7%, while only 9.9% use it for less than 1 hour a day. This data highlights the intense digital engagement of university students. See figure 2 below for more details:

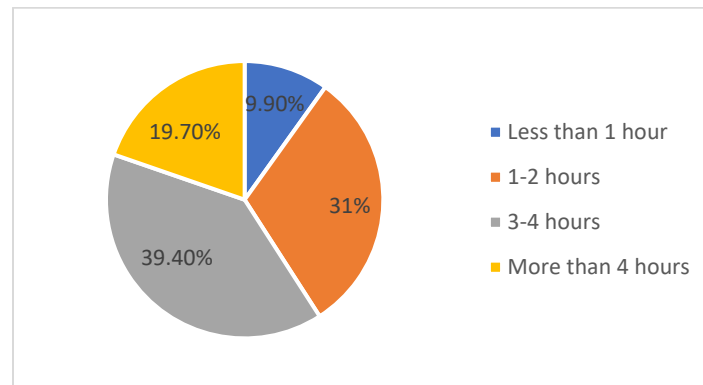


Figure 2: Daily social media usage

### d. Validity and Reliability Test

The validity test was conducted to ensure the questionnaire accurately measures the relevant variables, with the R Calculated value compared to the R Table value of 0.233, as suggested by Krieglstein et al. (2023). Using the Correlation Product Moment method, item X1.6 for the *Digital Self-Representation variable (X1)* was found invalid because its R Calculated value was below the R Table and was excluded from the analysis. After removing X1.6, all remaining items for the *Digital Self-Representation (X1)*, *Online Social Validation (X2)*, and *Network Identity (Y)* variables met the validity criterion. Following this, a reliability test was conducted to assess internal consistency, with a Cronbach Alpha value above 0.60 indicating reliability (Bujang et al., 2018).

The results showed that all variables had Cronbach Alpha values above 0.60, confirming the questionnaire's reliability for analysis. See Table 8 below for the detailed validity and reliability test results. The table 6 below details the validity and reliability test results for each variable:

Table 3: Digital self-representation variable (X1) validity

Question Item	R Calculated	R Table	Explanation
X1.1	0.730	0.233	Valid
X1.2	0.521	0.233	Valid
X1.3	0.666	0.233	Valid
X1.4	0.454	0.233	Valid
X1.5	0.699	0.233	Valid
X1.6	0.040	0.233	Invalid
X1.7	0.518	0.233	Valid

Table 4: Online social validation variable (X2) validity

Question Item	R Calculated	R Table	Explanation
X2.1	0.728	0.233	Valid
X2.2	0.710	0.233	Valid
X2.3	0.700	0.233	Valid
X2.4	0.782	0.233	Valid
X2.5	0.668	0.233	Valid
X2.6	0.646	0.233	Valid
X2.7	0.714	0.233	Valid

Table 5: Network identity variable (Y) validity

Question Item	R Calculated	R Table	Explanation
Y1	0.717	0.223	Valid
Y2	0.671	0.223	Valid
Y3	0.735	0.223	Valid
Y4	0.786	0.223	Valid
Y5	0.829	0.223	Valid
Y6	0.774	0.223	Valid

Table 6: The reliability test of variables

Variable	Cronbach Alpha	Result
Digital Self-Representation (X1)	0.675	Reliable
Online Social Validation (X2)	0.829	Reliable
Network Identity (Y)	0.844	Reliable

Thus, all variables in this study are valid and reliable, making them suitable for further analysis.

#### e. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the three research variables show the distribution of participants' responses. For *Digital Self-Representation (X1)*, scores range from 6 to 28, with a mean of 17.38 and a standard deviation of 4.334, indicating moderate variation. For *Online Social Validation (X2)*, scores range from 7 to 32, with a mean of 17.21 and a standard deviation of 5.806, showing greater variation. For *Network Identity (Y)*, scores range from 6 to 29, with a mean of 16.65 and

a standard deviation of 5.091, also reflecting moderate variation. See Table 10 below for more details:

Table 7: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Digital Self-Representation (X1)	6	28	17.38	4.334
Online Social Validation (X2)	7	32	17.21	5.806
Network Identity (Y)	6	29	16.65	5.091

#### f. Classical Assumption Tests

The normality test, using the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov method, showed a Sig. value of 0.062 ( $> 0.05$ ), confirming that the residuals in the regression model are normally distributed, in line with the assumption of linear regression (Gujarati & Porter, 2009). The multicollinearity test, using Tolerance and VIF values, showed no issues, with Tolerance  $> 0.10$  and VIF  $< 10$ , indicating weak relationships among independent variables, as recommended by Hair et al. (2021). The heteroscedasticity test, using the Glejser Test, confirmed constant variance of residuals across all independent variables (Greene, 2003). Multiple linear regression was then conducted to examine the effects of *Digital Self-Representation (X1)* and *Online Social Validation (X2)* on *Network Identity (Y)*.

#### g. Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was used to analyze the relationship between *Digital Self-Representation (X1)*, *Online Social Validation (X2)*, and *Network Identity (Y)*. The regression coefficient of 0.046 for X1 indicates that a 1% increase in Digital Self-Representation, while holding other variables constant, results in a 0.046-unit increase in Network Identity. Similarly, the regression coefficient of 0.679 for X2 suggests that a 1% increase in Online Social Validation leads to a 0.679-unit increase in Network Identity, assuming other variables remain constant.

#### h. Significance Test

The significance test evaluates the statistical relationship between independent and dependent variables. The F-test, with a significance value of 0.000 (less than 0.05), confirms that the regression model is significant, indicating that both *Digital Self-Representation (X1)* and *Online Social Validation (X2)* significantly affect *Network Identity (Y)* simultaneously (Field, 2013). The t-test reveals that X1 has a significance value of 0.708, indicating no significant individual effect on Y, while X2 has a significance value of 0.001, confirming its significant individual effect on Y (Hair et al., 2021). Additionally, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is 0.644, meaning that X1 and X2 explain 64.4% of the variation in Network Identity, with the remaining 35.6% explained by other factors not in the model. This high  $R^2$  value shows that the regression model effectively represents the relationship between the variables (Hair et al., 2021).

#### i. Thematic Analysis

Many respondents acknowledge that social media plays a role in how they present themselves, yet they emphasize their desire to stay authentic and not be entirely shaped by external

validation. Interestingly, even when they deny being influenced by likes or comments, they still admit that positive interactions make them feel more confident and appreciated. This pattern reveals an indirect dependence: respondents claim emotional independence but simultaneously recognize the motivational impact of supportive online feedback.

Based on the open-ended responses, the thematic analysis revealed three main clusters. *Self-Identification* captures how Generation Z perceives and constructs their identity online, including themes of self-expression, identity differentiation, and comfort in self-expression. *Social Management* reflects how individuals manage their image and evaluate themselves through social feedback, encompassing image management, social recognition, social comparison, and reflected identity feedback. *Network Participation* highlights engagement within digital communities and the influence of online interactions, represented by ease of online social connection and community-based identity. These clusters summarize the primary ways Generation Z navigates digital spaces, balancing personal identity, social evaluation, and participation in online networks.

### *Discussion*

#### *H1: The Relationship Between Social Media Usage and the Digital Self-Representation of Generation Z in Turkey.*

Statistical analysis reveals no significant relationship between the amount of time Generation Z in Turkey spends on social media and their digital self-representation ( $p = 0.708$ ). Contrary to expectations, the intensity of social media use does not directly influence how these individuals create or project their desired self-image. This finding challenges Manuel Castells' theory of the Network Society, which posits that identities are fundamentally shaped and reflected through digital networks (Castells, 2010). Despite the lack of statistical support for the hypothesis, the study confirms that Generation Z in Turkey continues to rely on social media as a central platform for constructing their digital identities, suggesting that factors like social validation, self-expression, and impression management are more influential than mere time spent online.

According to Castells (2011), in a networked society, identities are formed not only through physical interactions but also within broader digital networks. While this theory suggests digital networks profoundly impact identity formation, the present study did not find strong evidence that social media usage intensity directly dictates digital self-representation. Nevertheless, social media remains a vital tool for Turkish Generation Z, enabling them to connect with global cultures and access diverse information. This indicates that, even without a statistically significant association with usage volume, other factors, such as the pursuit of social approval, identity differentiation, and curated self-expression, likely contribute to how individuals idealize their digital identities (Burrow & Rainone, 2017).

While the quantitative data show no significant impact of usage intensity, the qualitative findings offer a more nuanced perspective. Interview responses reveal that social media serves as a crucial space for Generation Z to curate and present idealized versions of themselves, reflecting third-code constructs such as self-expression, identity differentiation, comfort in self-expression, and self-understanding through online interaction. One participant shared:

Social media allows me to show my aesthetic side, which I rarely show in the real world. Social media also gives me the opportunity to share aspects of myself, such as my style or appearance, that I would normally keep private. Sometimes it's funny, but that's because I don't always feel comfortable showing my true self directly.

This statement highlights how social media enables individuals to display facets of their identity that may remain hidden offline, thereby facilitating a more flexible, curated self-image and demonstrating self-expression and impression management in action.

This shift in self-representation is also reflected in how participants use social media to align their digital personas with broader social expectations. While the pressure to gain social approval through likes and comments was not the central focus of this study, participants indicated that social media is indeed a space where they can negotiate between presenting their personal identity and conforming to external norms. This aligns with Castells (2010, 2011) theory of digital identity, where online personas often differ from real-world selves, offering the freedom to experiment with idealized versions of one's identity that may not be visible in face-to-face interactions, connecting directly with third-code themes like identity differentiation and comfort in self-expression.

However, the divergence between digital and offline identities introduces challenges. As online interactions increase, many participants feel pressured to conform to digital norms shaped by platform algorithms and the expectations of a global audience. This can lead to the creation of overly curated, and sometimes inauthentic, self-images (Yue & Tang, 2024). Generation Z in Turkey faces the difficult task of balancing local cultural expectations with the often unrealistic beauty and success standards set by social media algorithms, which complicates their ability to present an authentic self and engage in self-expression and self-understanding through online interaction.

These findings are crucial for understanding the complex role social media plays in shaping digital self-representation, offering valuable insights for developing policies in education, mental health, and social media regulation. As social media use continues to rise among Generation Z, it will be vital for policymakers to create initiatives that help individuals balance their digital and offline identities in healthy ways. Moreover, efforts should be made to minimize the negative psychological effects of dependence on external validation (Kross et al., 2013). This will help ensure that the digital identities of young people in Turkey contribute to their personal growth and social development, while also accounting for the complex influences of both global and local digital landscapes, reflecting third-code dimensions such as impression management, identity differentiation, and comfort in self-expression.

## *H2: Online Social Approval Through 'Likes' and Comments Significantly Impacts The Online Social Approval and Self-Confidence of Generation Z in Turkey.*

Hypothesis 2 examines the impact of online social approval through “likes” and “comments” on the self-confidence and online social approval of Generation Z. Statistical test results support this hypothesis and demonstrate that the increase in interactions received through social media has a significant effect on individuals' self-confidence and their sense of being valued within a group.

These findings confirm that in the digital age, approval received through social media is a fundamental factor in shaping individuals' self-perception, reflecting third-code constructs such as self-confidence, social recognition, and reflected identity feedback. It has been concluded that the number of 'likes' and comments boosts self-confidence and strengthens the feeling of acceptance within online communities (Susilawaty et al., 2023). This phenomenon is also valid for Generation Z in Turkey, as these mechanisms influence this group in the process of creating and maintaining their digital identities.

In the context of Castells' theory of network society, social media serves as the main platform for gaining social approval, which in turn influences individuals' self-concept. Castells (2010) emphasizes that in network society, identity is formed not only through face-to-face interactions but also through relationships built through digital networks. Generation Z in Turkey places importance on 'likes' and comments as key indicators of social acceptance in their digital networks. This phenomenon shows that this generation is highly dependent on the reactions they receive from their digital network audience to build and validate their social approval, highlighting third-code themes such as social comparison, reflected identity feedback, and self-confidence. One participant said:

Seeing more people liking something than usual really boosts my confidence. It makes me feel recognized and valued. It ultimately boosts my self-esteem and makes me feel more positive, like I'm doing something right.

I pay more attention and care, ...

Based on the places I visit, the music I listen to, and the activities I engage in, social media gives people who don't fully know me the opportunity to make a preliminary analysis.

These statements show how online feedback interacts with individual awareness and self-perception, linking directly to self-confidence and social recognition themes. However, dependence on online social approval can have a negative impact on self-esteem dynamics. The constant search for external approval can increase anxiety and uncertainty about an individual's self-esteem. Individuals who focus on digital acceptance may experience fluctuations in self-esteem based on the social status they achieve in online environments (Vogel et al., 2014). This has also been observed in Generation Z in Turkey, where dependence on social media affects not only their self-perception but also their psychological well-being, linking to third-code constructs such as self-confidence and social recognition.

Although social media's role in content validation is significant, an interesting dynamic emerges regarding how audience reactions affect individuals' sense of self-worth. Individuals define and present themselves through digital platforms, but these presentations often do not reflect their true identities, which can impact their life satisfaction (Hällgren & Björk, 2023). As the number of "likes" and positive comments they receive increases, they feel more valued and accepted, reflecting third-code themes of social recognition and reflected identity feedback. Conversely, a lack of interaction or negative comments can significantly damage their self-

confidence. In Turkey, where collectivist culture is strong, the feeling of being accepted in digital social networks plays a critical role in identity formation. Users who express different identities on social media report higher life satisfaction (Gölcü et al., 2019).

As described by Anttiroiko (2015), Castells argues that individual identities are formed through interactions within interconnected social media networks. Statistical analysis revealed a significant relationship between the level of digital network participation and the development of network identity. This finding suggests that the more active individuals are on digital platforms, the stronger and more defined their identities become within the digital social context. One participant shared:

Based on the places I visit, the music I listen to, and the activities I engage in, social media gives people who don't fully know me the opportunity to make a preliminary analysis.

This statement illustrates how social media allows individuals to construct identities based on the aspects of their lives they choose to make public, which others may perceive as an initial reflection of who they are. Generation Z in Turkey, through their active participation on social media, constructs a more open identity by sharing various aspects of their lives, such as daily activities, lifestyle, and personal interests.

The interactions and feedback they receive from their digital audiences directly shape how they perceive themselves, whether through the number of likes, comments, or other forms of interaction. This demonstrates how social media provides them with a space to explore and express themselves more freely, but also creates tension between their freedom of expression and the social expectations of their followers. Another participant reflected:

It's actually hard, but I usually maintain the same attitude on social media as in real life. Sometimes I hold back from sharing everything so I don't become too dependent on other people's opinions.

This statement highlights that Generation Z faces the challenge of balancing authenticity with adapting their online identity based on external feedback. Social media communities play a crucial role in this process, as young people often shape their identity through the groups they join online. Research shows that Generation Z's digital identity is influenced by their connections to communities such as online friend groups, hobbies, or political views (Peredy et al., 2024). By engaging with communities that match their values and interests, individuals develop an identity shaped by these interactions, reflecting ease of online social connection, community-based identity, and interaction-driven identity.

However, many members of Generation Z are also aware of the tension between their online persona and real-life identity. They recognize that maintaining a perfect image on social media is challenging and often reflect on how to balance their online presence with their true selves, highlighting identity consistency and comfort in self-expression. This can be understood from a participant's statement:

I definitely only share my good side on social media; I wouldn't share anything bad, whatever it may be. After all, we all want to appear good and positive.

This reflects how individuals often present an idealized version of themselves on social media, sharing only what fits a positive image, while feedback from others subtly shapes how they continue to present themselves online. Being active in digital networks affects how they see the world, especially Generation Z, who grow up immersed in social media and encounter perspectives from all over the globe. This exposure makes them more open and curious, yet it also raises questions about how authentic or consistent their online identities really are. Growing up with digital technology, they develop unique ways of learning and understanding the world that differ from older generations. Some people resist the pressure to seek approval online, while others adapt to it, showing how identity in the digital age is constantly negotiated between personal authenticity and the desire to appear “ideal.” Social media pushes everyone into this balancing act, encouraging reflection on how we present ourselves both online and offline in a world that never stops connecting us.

#### CONCLUSION

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping the digital identity of Generation Z in Turkey, with intensive engagement enabling individuals to more effectively construct their desired self-image. This supports Castells' network society theory, which suggests that digital identities are influenced not just by personal choices but also by the dynamic interactions within global social media networks. For Generation Z in Turkey, digital identities are constructed through relationships in virtual environments, enabling them to create identities that transcend local geographical and cultural boundaries. Additionally, the study emphasizes social media's role in facilitating the expression of more fluid and dynamic identities, often distinct from an individual's offline self. These digital spaces allow for the presentation of idealized identities, offering opportunities to experiment with different versions of the self. In the context of rapid cultural and social changes in Turkey, social media has become a key tool for young people to explore and navigate their identities. As the digital world becomes increasingly intertwined with daily life, online identities foster stronger connections between individuals and digital communities, both locally and globally. This process reflects the ongoing negotiation between authenticity and idealization.

This study provides important insights into how social media influences digital identity by combining quantitative data and qualitative feedback, offering a comprehensive view of how online self-representation and social validation interact. It emphasizes the need for digital literacy to help Generation Z manage the psychological effects of social media, as well as the importance of creating platforms that support authentic self-expression. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample consisted of 71 respondents from a single faculty, which, while homogeneous and thus adequate for detecting the effects of interest, may limit generalizability. The incorporation of qualitative data through open-ended questions helped mitigate concerns regarding sample size and enriched the quantitative findings. However, the study did not examine potential differences across social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Twitter) in shaping digital identity. Future research should investigate these platform-

specific effects and consider additional factors such as social anxiety and family influence to further elucidate the mechanisms of digital identity formation.

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