

Research Article | Araştırma Makalesi

Self-Exploitation, Transparency, and Control: Byung-Chul Han's Perspective on Social Media

Öz-Sömürü, Şeffaflık ve Kontrol: Byung-Chul Han Düşüncesinde Sosyal Medya



İsmail KAPLAN (Asst. Prof. Dr.)
Anadolu University, Faculty of Communication Sciences
Eskişehir/Türkiye
ismailkaplan@anadolu.edu.tr

Başvuru Tarihi | Date Received: 01.02.2025
Yayına Kabul Tarihi | Date Accepted: 23.06.2025
Yayınlanma Tarihi | Date Published: 30.07.2025

Kaplan, İ. (2025). Self-Exploitation, Transparency, and Control: Byung-Chul Han's Perspective on Social Media. *Erciyes İletişim Dergisi*, 12(2), 405-418 <https://doi.org/10.17680/erciyesiletisim.1631151>

Abstract

This study examines the impact of the digital age on individuals through Byung-Chul Han's critiques of social media. It examines both social and individual transformations using Han's concepts of "self-exploitation", "transparency", "burnout", and "surveillance". The analysis is based on chapters from 11 of Han's works, all translated into Turkish, that discuss social media. Content analysis was used in the study. Books were searched using keywords such as 'social media', 'digital media', and 'internet', and content related to the study was coded. The findings were classified under specific themes and interpreted. Results of the study show Han's argument that social media fosters superficiality and echo chambers, while users' constant self-optimization leads to burnout, depression, and narcissism. He also critiques social media's role in distorting the public sphere and spreading fake news. Han's insights offer a critical framework for understanding the psychological and social pressures of the digital age. To counter these effects, he advocates rejecting the culture of speed, embracing contemplation, and adopting alternative lifestyles such as meditation.

Keywords: Social Media, Transparency, Self-Exploitation, Surveillance, Echo Chambers.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Byung-Chul Han'ın sosyal medya konusundaki düşüncelerini inceleyerek dijital çağın bireyler üzerindeki etkilerini anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada Han'ın geliştirdiği "öz-sömürü", "şeffaflık", "yorgunluk" ve "gözetim" gibi kavramlar çerçevesinde sosyal medyanın yarattığı dönüşümler ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma, Han'ın eserlerinde sosyal medya ile ilgili ortaya koyduğu görüşleri analiz ederek bu platformların modern toplum üzerindeki etkilerini tartışmakta; Han'ın Türkçeye çevrilen 11 eserinde yer alan sosyal medya ile ilgili bölümleri kapsamaktadır. Çalışmada içerik analizi yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Kitaplar "sosyal medya", "dijital medya", "internet" gibi anahtar kelimeler kullanılarak taranmış ve çalışma ile ilgili içerikler kodlanmıştır. Elde edilen bulgular belirli temalar altında sınıflandırılarak yorumlanmıştır. Buna göre Han, sosyal medya platformlarının bireyleri yüzeyselliğe ve aynılaşmaya ittiğini, bireylerin kendi yankı odalarına hapsedildiğini savunmaktadır. Ayrıca sosyal medya kullanıcılarının sürekli olarak kendilerini optimize etmeye çalışması, psikolojik tükenmişlik, depresyon ve narsisizm gibi rahatsızlıkları artırmaktadır. Çalışmada ayrıca Han'ın, sosyal medyanın kamusal alanı nasıl dönüştürdüğünü ve sahte haberlerin yayılmasına nasıl zemin hazırladığı konularındaki eleştirilerini de kapsamaktadır. Sonuç olarak Han'ın eleştirileri, sosyal medyanın bireyler üzerindeki baskısını ve dijital çağın yarattığı psikolojik ve toplumsal sorunları anlamak için kapsamlı bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Han, bu etkilerle başa çıkmak için bireylerin hız kültürünü reddetmeleri, derin düşünceye yönelmeleri ve meditasyon gibi alternatif yaşam biçimlerini benimsemeleri gerektiğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Medya, Şeffaflık, Öz-Sömürü, Gözetim, Yankı Odaları.



Introduction

The digital age has radically changed how individuals communicate, access information, and express themselves. One of the elements at the focal point of this change is social media. Social media and the digital age have not only transformed how individuals communicate but also reshaped perceptions of fundamental concepts such as individuality, freedom, and surveillance. Byung-Chul Han's critiques on social media provide an important framework for understanding this new social structure and its effects on individuals.

In 2010, Byung-Chul Han gained international fame with his book *The Burnout Society*. After studying metallurgy in Seoul, he moved to Germany in the 1980s and completed a doctorate in philosophy. This transition between disciplines sheds light on Han's intellectual flexibility as he generates different concepts to explain modern society. In his early years in academia, Han focused on philosophy, literature, and theology, but more recently he has been interested in eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, ethics, cultural theory, aesthetics, and media (Yeşil, 2021).

Describing himself as an "optimistic refugee", Han is known as a cosmopolitan, contemplative thinker, social critic, philosopher of beauty, and theorist of media and technology. His philosophy on all these subjects is built on the contributions of philosophers and writers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka, Hannah Arendt and Peter Handke. At the same time, while expressing his thoughts, he borrows various concepts from Jeremy Bentham, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard (Wyllie & Knepper, 2024, p. 71). While his philosophy is rooted in the continental philosophical tradition such as Heidegger and Hegel, it is also deeply influenced by East Asian philosophy, especially Buddhism. Han's minimalist writing style allows him to present complex philosophical concepts in a simple and understandable way, making him accessible to a broad audience (Suetzl, 2017).

The main purpose of this study is to examine Byung-Chul Han's criticisms of social media and his contribution to understanding contemporary society. The focus of this study is to discuss the effects of social media on the individual based on Han's concepts such as transparency society, surveillance and self-exploitation. Understanding these effects is not only of academic importance but also crucial for comprehending the functioning of daily life.

The study examines the psychological, socio-economic and cultural effects of social media on individuals and society within Han's philosophical framework. This study is important in that it provides a theoretical basis for coping with the challenges brought about by digitalization. Han's works should be seen as an important intellectual resource for addressing the challenges faced by modern society. Therefore, this study will contribute to the field of digital literacy by helping individuals behave more consciously in the digital world.

The research conducted within the scope of this study is limited to Byung-Chul Han's books that have been translated into Turkish. It does not cover all of Han's works or those that have not yet been translated into Turkish. Furthermore, this study is a qualitative analysis and does not involve an empirical data collection process.

1. Main Points in Byung-Chul Han's Work

The rapid advancements in technology, along with the swift changes in economic parameters and social structures, have led various thinkers to characterize the age we

live in differently. Approaches centered on different elements such as information, computers, the internet, and finance offer various ways to make sense of today's reality. Han also contributes to these discussions with concepts such as "burnout", "transparency", "performance" and "success" (Aydemir & Ünsal, 2024, p. 175).

Although Han's theories and books may seem repetitive, what he actually does is define postmodern society from different angles. In each book or article, Han focuses on a theme related to the structure of postmodern society, and the common point that he emphasizes in all his works is his revisions to Foucault's disciplinary society approach (Durmuşahmet, 2022). According to him, today's society is no longer composed of mental hospitals, prisons, barracks, and factories—the elements of the disciplinary society. They have been replaced by fitness centers, offices, banks, shopping malls, and gene laboratories. The society of this age does not consist of obedient subjects, but of individuals who are objects of performance. These individuals are entrepreneurs who constantly strive to create a better version of themselves (Han, 2015, p. 17). In this new social order, individuals are exploited not by an external authority but by themselves. Individuals who act under the illusion of freedom are exhausted by the pressure to achieve success and are driven to pathologies such as depression. Han argues that these individuals turn themselves into "voluntary slaves," thus increasing neurological violence (Picchione, 2023).

While analyzing contemporary society, Byung-Chul Han focuses especially on the negative effects of neoliberalism, capitalism, and technology on human life. According to Han, neoliberalism and capitalism are the systems that exploit human freedom and push individuals to maintain their own slavery. By keeping individuals under constant pressure to perform and produce, these systems restrict their freedom and encourage self-discipline. Technology, according to Han, is a factor that further deepens this process. Especially the internet and social media cause individuals to disclose their private lives and live under constant surveillance. Han argues that technology traps people in an information society, where individuals are exposed to a constant flow of information. This situation weakens people's ability to think and communicate deeply, pushing them into a cycle of superficial information consumption (Morgan, 2023).

In 21st century philosophy, Han has carved out a distinctive place for himself and has become renowned for his critical examination of society, especially in the context of digital technology, capitalism, and contemporary ways of being. His work also focuses on the critique of the "achievement society," which applies to all aspects of our lives today. In contrast to the disciplinary society of the past, the achievement society is a description of a society characterized by self-exploitation and the internalization of performance pressures. The achievement society transforms individuals into "achievement subjects" by forcing them to optimize their productivity and self-image, often at the expense of their well-being and authentic existence. Thus, the social control based on coercion, which was mentioned in the disciplinary society, is replaced by another form of control based on the glorification of visibility. This, in Han's words, constitutes the "transparency society". In the transparency society, the individual is constantly forced to reveal himself. Moreover, everything is reduced to superficial information in the name of controllability, leading to a loss of originality and depth. Due to the loss of depth in the transparency society, everything starts to look alike. The "other" disappears, and ultimately, the Burnout Society emerges. Individuals burdened by the pressures of success and transparency experience psychological distress. The "positive violence" that comes with the absolutization of success arises from the individual's endless and unlimited effort to improve himself.

In traditional job descriptions, the point at which an employee completes his job is clearly defined. Today, however, individuals are constantly pressured to improve their performance, entering into a race with themselves. The area where positive violence is most evident is health. The individual strives to stay healthy at all times. Nevertheless, all these efforts do not prevent him from experiencing burnout (Knepper et al., 2024).

According to Han (2024c, pp. 54–55), the digital age is an era in which the individual turns his back on eternity. In this age, the individual who stores large amounts of data and information does not pursue his memories. He easily gets bored and gives up practices that require time and effort such as loyalty, responsibility, promise, trust, and commitment. The individual of the digital age is short-term-oriented and inconsistent. Although he is well-informed about everything, he becomes disoriented due to the absence of a unifying narrative. Narratives have disappeared in the digital age.

Byung-Chul Han's views on social media are discussed in the context of the effects of digital communication and neoliberalism on individuals. Han argues that social media and digital communication cause people to lose their inner world and depth. In this context, he states that forcing individuals to be transparent leads to isolation and a feeling of constant surveillance in society. As a result, individuals find it difficult to establish authentic connections, and superficiality becomes the norm (Šokčević, 2024).

Han argues that the way out of these crises is through the rejection of speed and relentless positivity. A lifestyle based on slowness, meditation and contemplation can mitigate the destructive effects of the digital age. Han also refers to Hegel's dialectical method, stating that a meaningful life is not possible without "negativity." Negativity, conflict, and acceptance of differences are indispensable for both individual and societal development (Picchione, 2023).

2. Method

This study analyses Byung-Chul Han's views on social media in his books. The emergence of the concepts Han uses to define today's society is closely related to digital communication and social media. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the effects of social media on society in order to understand the structure of today's society.

Until the preparation of this study, 21 of Han's works have been translated into Turkish. These works focus on different fields, such as psychopolitics, transparency, power, media, culture, religion, death, and beauty. When Han's works are analyzed, it is seen that 11 of his books directly include his views on social media. The chapters containing these views in the books were searched using the keywords "social media", "new media", "digital media", "digital" and "internet". The relevant chapters were copied into a new file along with their preceding and following sections to preserve the integrity of meaning.

In the next stage of the study, the created file was carefully read, and the coding stage began. The coding process involves analyzing the findings, dividing them into meaningful sections, and determining what is expressed in each section. The researcher divides the data into sections that form a meaningful whole. Each of these sections is called a code. The researcher who reaches the codes can thus establish relationships between different codes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, p. 243). There are three different approaches to coding. First, the researcher can prepare a code list and use it before starting the coding process based on an existing theory or conceptual framework. Another method is to prepare codes based on the findings. In this method, the researcher employs inductive analysis

and derives codes directly from the findings. However, most researchers use a method that combines these two approaches. In this approach, general categories are determined before the coding process, and this list can be modified as necessary during coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 220–221).

Content analysis was chosen for this study because it aims to examine Byung-Chul Han's thoughts on social media in his works. Content analysis is a good way to systematically reveal the hidden meanings, recurring themes, and conceptual structures in texts. Additionally, an inductive approach was adopted in the study, and Han's critiques of social media were classified through codes derived directly from the texts. This approach aimed to evaluate Han's thoughts on social media in a comprehensive manner without being bound by a predefined theoretical framework.

All codes identified in this study are categorized under the following themes:

- The nature of social media
- Surveillance
- Superficiality and sameness
- Infodemic and manipulation
- Public space
- Destruction of narratives
- Extreme positivity and psychological disorders

In order to ensure the reliability of the analysis, the coding process was validated through a second round of coding by an independent coder. The researcher sent a selected section of the document along with the coding template to the coder, who then recoded the selected content. When the researcher's and the coder's coding were compared, the similarity rate was 92%.

3. Findings

In this section of the study, Byung-Chul Han's views on social media in his 11 books are presented and interpreted under determined themes.

3.1. The Nature of Social Media

Social media, one of the most important cornerstones shaping our era, appears in Byung-Chul Han's works through discussions of its various characteristics.

According to Han (2018, p. 50), the internet is a distinct space, fundamentally different from the physical world. The internet consists of countless interconnected nodes of similar structure. Because of the structure of the Internet, no connection is prioritized over another. All connections are in constant motion in space. There is no destination point on the Internet. On the Internet, unlike in real life, one does not move physically but only surfs between connections. Therefore, it is not possible to pay attention to anything, everything can only be skimmed.

Han (2020a, p. 22), argues that every form of power employs tools to subjugate individuals, with the smartphone fulfilling this role today. Smartphones have become modern sacred objects. Han conceptualizes smartphones through religious metaphors. According to him, smartphones function like a rosary because of the ease of carrying them in the hand. These devices allow us to be constantly online on social media. Every like on

social media functions as a digital “amen.” Smartphones function not only as surveillance devices but also as portable confessionals. Social media influencers pledge to consistently deliver original content to their followers. Even the advertisements offered by influencers are in demand by their followers. Influencers who give motivational speeches on social media are worshipped as role models. Their followers, who purchase the same products, emulate them like disciples (Han, 2020a, p. 13).

3.2. Surveillance

According to Han (2022b, p. 18), although digital technologies claim to liberate individuals, they, in fact, expand surveillance into all aspects of individual life. Digital networks initially emerged with the promise of unlimited freedom, generating widespread enthusiasm. Today, it has been realized that this enthusiasm was an illusion. The perceived freedom of digital networks has, paradoxically, facilitated more effective surveillance. This is because social media and digital technologies primarily function as expansive surveillance tools. Technologies designed to facilitate daily tasks such as communication, cleaning, and health monitoring, simultaneously enable pervasive surveillance and it actually cause surveillance to infiltrate every moment of daily life (Han, 2022a, p. 12). Every online action is tracked and stored. Every digital trace a person leaves contributes to a representation that is more comprehensive and precise than their own self-perception. An individual produces information with the smallest behavior and movement (Han, 2020a, p. 69).

Neoliberal power structures enforce surveillance and control not through discipline, but by incentivizing perceived freedom. Rather than issuing direct commands, it subtly influences behavior through continuous nudges. (Han, 2022a, p. 12). Han (2021, p. 48) points out that this new social order is turning into a society of control. The society of control defines the subject’s self-disclosure and voluntary relinquishment of his private life without being subjected to any external pressure, simply because he feels the need to do so. In a sense, this is self-exploitation and is more dangerous than external exploitative behavior since the individual sees the behavior that exploits him as his own freedom.

In Bentham’s Panopticon, the surveillant, though invisible, has an undeniable presence. The surveilled individual is always aware of being watched and adjusts his behavior accordingly. In contrast, within the digital panopticon, individuals remain unaware of being watched. Unaware of the surveillant’s presence, the subject willingly exposes personal data, actions, and physical self (Han, 2022b, p. 47). In this case, the person is an “entrepreneur” who exploits himself. In an ongoing effort to self-monitor and optimize, individuals become both perpetrators and victims within their own internalized labor camps. He is both the prisoner and the guard (Han, 2020a, p. 68). The distinction between Big Brother and the surveilled is blurred, everyone watches everyone and is watched by everyone (Han, 2024b, p. 85).

The surveillance-permitting structure of new communication technologies turns individuals into a mass that only generates profit. Thus, capitalism is reconfigured as surveillance capitalism (Han, 2022b, p. 67). The more information a person produces about himself, the more open he is to exploitation. The information that a person sends to the digital network makes him more transparently observable than he knows (Han, 2017, p. 108). This increases the individual’s economic value in the digital sphere.

3.3. Superficiality and Sameness

Life events are no longer structured as narratives but instead fragmented into discrete pieces of information. Social media content, rather than forming coherent narratives, exists as isolated data points. Han (2024a, p. 33) characterizes social media platforms as “information media”. In these environments, information lacks logical cohesion and accumulates without forming a narrative. It only multiplies by adding to each other and forms a pile. Ephemeral social media stories, despite their name, do not construct meaningful narratives. These contents are focused on attracting attention, gathering interest and making advertisements (Han, 2024a, p. 72). Digital communication remains superficial, as individuals consume vast amounts of information passively, without focus, direct experience, or critical engagement (Han, 2023, p. 9).

On social media, neither users nor their content foster genuine relationships. What seems like connection is merely superficial. As digital connections proliferate, they remain inherently shallow, preventing meaningful engagement. As a result, social media and digital communication remain superficial and lack depth (Han, 2020b, p. 46). Digital connectivity does not necessarily lead to improved communication. On the contrary, due to the nature of digital communication, people connect with people similar to themselves and are trapped in their own echoes in the digital environment. Therefore, people’s horizons narrow and the individual enters an endless “ego loop” (Han, 2023, p. 9). While online, individuals reinforce their filter bubbles by consuming information that aligns with their preferences. As a result, individuals become increasingly entrenched in their own opinions while disregarding opposing perspectives (Han, 2022a, p. 33). Rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue, social media users amplify their own voices within echo chambers. Likes, replies and followers only serve to reinforce the “echo of the self” (Han, 2020b, p. 19). In every dimension of digital communication, as in social media, one encounters responses that reinforce one’s own opinions. Search engines prioritize pages the user is likely to engage with. Thus, in the public sphere, the person only encounters messages that he likes and does not hear the other. This environment, which is free from negativity, criticism and distance, is no longer seen as a public space, but as a private space (Han, 2020c, p. 54).

According to Han (2023, p. 46), there is no room for negativity in this world where connections replace relationships. As long as individuals follow opinions similar to their own and approves it with the “like” button, they remain insulated from dissenting and critical perspectives. Digital screens protect the individual from the negative and uncanny ways of alienation, but the relentless reinforcement of sameness transforms social media into an increasingly oppressive space.

3.4. Infodemic and Manipulation

Han (2023, p. 72) defines the current form of communication as hyper-communication. In the age of hyper-communication, there is no place for silence, there is the noise of communication. This noise prevents us from hearing what we really need to hear. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as an ‘infodemic’ or ‘information epidemic,’ facilitates the viral spread of information (Han, 2022a, p. 21). The human mind has difficulty in processing such a large amount of information. As a result, the person is driven to passivity and indifference. The masses of images and texts cause the perception to become detached from the facts. As a result, the person loses the ability to interpret facts correctly (Han, 2022b, p. 61).

Digital communication has drastically reduced the cost of information production, making it nearly zero. Anyone who creates a social media account in a few steps for free can freely transmit the information they produce to other people anywhere in the world. The worrying aspect of this situation is that it has become equally easy to produce and spread fake news. In the past, the high cost of mass media distribution limited the spread of misinformation. Today, however, the ease of content creation and sharing has transformed social media into a misinformation hub. Today, due to the ease of information production and distribution, social media has turned into a fake news factory (Han, 2022a, p. 25).

In the current situation, manipulation is applied in all kinds of technical and psychological forms. Fake news spreads rapidly via automated phone messages, troll armies, bots, and fake accounts on social media. The mass dissemination of information by social media bots artificially shapes the public agenda. Likewise, the number of followers and interactions of some social media accounts can be artificially increased, and ideas that lack public support can be framed as mainstream opinions. Thanks to the possibilities of social media, the ideological climate of the public sphere is determined in the desired direction (Han, 2022a, p. 25).

3.5. Public Sphere

Today, the public sphere is undergoing a radical change. Digital media have a centrifugal force that fragments the public sphere. The centralized structure of traditional mass media resembles an amphitheater. By contrast, digital media has a rhizomatic structure and persists through dispersion and proliferation. A digital media user's attention is fragmented across various topics rather than focused on matters of public concern (Han, 2022a, p. 21).

According to Han (2022a, p. 30), digital herds cannot form a collective political power. Social media audiences function as consumers shaped by influencers. Because algorithms prioritize personalized content, they prevent the formation of a shared public agenda. Information remains confined to the private sphere, where it is both produced and consumed. The Internet prevents the realization of the communicative action. Instead, it creates an echo chamber where everyone advertises themselves. In analogue communication, there is a concrete interlocutor. In digital communication there is no such interlocutor. In social media, one constantly sends messages, but these messages are not addressed to a concrete person. This kind of communication does not foster a culture of discussion. This form of communication is a flood of emotions that does not create public opinion (Han, 2023, pp. 84–86).

Another feature of social media is that it de-mediates communication. What Han (2024b, p. 26) means here is that communication takes place between users without any mediation. Everyone produces information and sends it to others, but these messages do not pass through the filter of an editor or an opinion-former. Although this development may seem positive at first, its combination with echo chambers and algorithms ultimately undermines the culture of discussion.

3.6. Destruction of Narratives

Han (2024a, p. 11) states that narratives play a crucial role in the formation of society. Narratives, shaped by shared rituals and collective experiences, foster a sense of community. However, in contemporary society, enduring grand narratives have been supplanted by ephemeral, easily consumable information. Stories shared in digital

environments lack the depth of true narratives; they function as transient, consumable content or mere advertisements. Without grand narratives, society shifts from a collective community to a consumer-driven culture. As narratives lose their value, people no longer tell each other stories. Dialogues remain at the level of mere information exchange. A story listener is attentive, whereas a social media user experiences distraction.

The decline of narratives contributes to the erosion of genuine emotional depth. Emotions have a narrative depth and breadth. Today, emotion has been replaced by affect. Unlike emotions, which require narrative expression, affect seeks immediate release. Digital communication facilitates the transmission and release of affects (Han, 2020a, p. 50).

3.7. Extreme positivity and Psychological Disorders

Social media leads to various forms of psychological disorders. In the digital environment, individuals who remain trapped in their own echo chambers and develop excessive self-focus exhibit narcissistic tendencies. A narcissistic individual perceives the world solely through their own perspective, interpreting everything in relation to their own self. The end result of this process is the individual's self-destruction and consumption (Han, 2024b, p. 73). Social media is cleansed of "the negativity of the other." Users engage primarily with like-minded individuals, reinforcing each other's views. The lack of diverse perspectives fosters a sense of emptiness, which can contribute to feelings of depression. The individual, who is constantly validated and continuously striving for better, paradoxically harms themselves. This occurs because the accumulation of "ego libido" leads to psychological distress (Han, 2021, p. 58).

The culture of approval, which social media serves as a driving force, aims to eliminate negativity from human life. All content is designed to maximize likes, constantly being restructured to ensure approval. Subjects of this culture, which seeks to avoid pain as much as possible, become caught in a frenzy of seeking approval. Meanwhile, the purifying effect of pain is forgotten (Han, 2022b, p. 15). Pain plays an important role in the perception of reality. The culture of approval, which is devoid of pain and continuously exerts an anesthetizing effect, ultimately strips the world of its reality (Han, 2022b, p. 43).

Social media does not offer users a "dislike" option. Instead, it presents them with content they are highly likely to like and encourages them to approve it. Digital communication, stripped of all friction, thus transforms into a rapid exchange of information. The acceleration of information exchange is crucial for capitalism because the growth in the volume of communication also increases its economic value. Rather than the negativity created by rejection, the positivity generated by approval continuously expands the volume of communication (Han, 2020c, p. 23).

Conclusion

Byung-Chul Han's critiques of social media and the digital age offer a powerful framework for deeply analyzing individuals' lifestyles, communication habits, and social structures. Han goes beyond a superficial analysis of how social media and the digital age transform individuals and societies; he explores the socio-economic and psychological dynamics driving this transformation. His critiques allow the modern individual to confront new realities defined by concepts such as "self-exploitation," "transparency," and "burnout."

According to Han, social media pressures individuals to constantly optimize themselves and perform. This paradoxically positions individuals as both subjects and objects. While believing themselves free, social media users voluntarily display their lives, unknowingly

becoming part of an invisible surveillance mechanism. In this context, Han argues that concepts such as freedom, privacy, and individuality need to be redefined in the digital age. Social media's power to create a "transparency society" not only provides individuals with a space to display themselves but also forces them into this self-exposure. Transparency, at the cost of losing privacy and depth, establishes a control mechanism through superficiality and conformity.

Han's concept of "self-exploitation" is key to understanding the performance pressure imposed by neoliberalism. Social media functions as a platform where individuals continually strive to present better versions of themselves, inevitably leading to self-consumption. As a result, individuals exploit themselves rather than being subjected to external authority. The constant effort to showcase, optimize, and gain approval leads individuals to experience psychological exhaustion and pathologies such as depression.

Han argues that the digital age has created a culture of superficiality that deprives individuals of "depth." Social media content consists of fragmented information rather than cohesive narratives, leading to rapid consumption and forgetfulness. As meaningful and deep relationships are replaced by superficial connections, individuals become increasingly isolated and trapped within the "echo of the self." This leads to intolerance toward different perspectives and the "other." At the same time, societal dialogue and the public sphere weaken. The fragmentation of the public sphere by digital media confines individuals to echo chambers within their private spaces.

Another significant aspect of Han's critiques is what he calls the "information epidemic" of the digital age—an environment of hyper-communication. Social media platforms create a setting in which individuals are constantly exposed to an overwhelming flow of information, pushing them toward passivity. Han argues that constant information overload diminishes critical thinking, increasing susceptibility to manipulation. While digital platforms facilitate the spread of fake news and manipulation, they also direct individuals toward a consumerist lifestyle. In this regard, rather than increasing societal and political engagement, social media functions as a tool that turns individuals into apolitical and consumer-driven beings.

Han considers the disappearance of narratives essential to understanding the digital age's impact on individuals. Narratives provide individuals with a sense of belonging to society and strengthen social bonds. However, in the digital age, these narratives have been replaced by short-lived and rapidly consumed fragments of information. This weakens individuals' sense of social belonging while also leading to the superficialization of emotions.

Finally, Han's critique of excessive positivity offers an essential perspective for understanding the impact of social media culture on individuals. Social media functions as a system that pressures individuals to maintain a positive image and seek approval. This leads individuals to avoid confrontation with negativity and criticism, weakening their connection with reality. Han highlights the transformative role of pain and negativity in human life, arguing that social media disconnects individuals from reality by erasing these essential experiences. The culture of excessive positivity drives individuals into a relentless pursuit of self-improvement, ultimately leading to burnout and psychological distress.

Byung-Chul Han's critiques of social media provide a comprehensive and critical framework for understanding the impact of the digital age on individuals and societies. His works offer important insights into how individuals can cope with the performance pressure imposed by digital technologies and neoliberalism. By advocating alternative lifestyles such as slowness, deep reflection, and meditation, Han provides a roadmap for individuals to protect themselves from the negative effects of the digital age. His critiques not only explain the effects of digital technologies on individuals but also offer valuable clues about how a more human-centered social order can be established. In this sense, Han's works should be regarded as a significant intellectual resource for addressing the challenges faced by modern society.

References

- Aydemir, M. A., & Ünsal, R. (2024). Parazit Toplum: Yorgunluk Toplumunda Hakikati Örselemek. *Journal of Humanity and Society (İnsan & Toplum)*, 14(1), 171–195. <https://doi.org/10.12658/M0727>
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2015). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Fourth edition). SAGE.
- Durmuşahmet, A. (2022). Gözetim Akışı: Byung-Chul Han'ın Disiplin Toplumu Eleştirisi Olarak Performans Toplumu ve Kültürel İklimlendirme. 4. *BOYUT Medya ve Kültürel Çalışmalar Dergisi / 4. BOYUT Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 0(20), 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.26650/4boyut.2022.003>
- Han, B.-C. (2015). *Yorgunluk Toplumu* (S. Yalçın, Trans.; 1st ed.). Açılım Kitap.
- Han, B.-C. (2017). *Şiddetin Topolojisi* (S. Fischer Foundation, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Metis Yayınları.
- Han, B.-C. (2018). *Zamanın Kokusu: Bulunma Sanatı Üzerine Felsefi Bir Deneme* (Ş. Öztürk, Trans.; 1st ed.). Metis Yayınları.
- Han, B.-C. (2020a). *Psikopolitika: Neoliberalizm ve Yeni İktidar Teknikleri* (H. Barışcan, Trans.; 3rd ed.). Metis Yayınları.
- Han, B.-C. (2020b). *Ritüellerin Yok Oluşuna Dair: Günümüzün Bir Topolojisi* (Ç. Tanyeri, Trans.; 1st ed.). İnka Kitap.
- Han, B.-C. (2020c). *Şeffaflık Toplumu* (H. Barışcan, Trans.; 5th ed.). Metis Yayınları.
- Han, B.-C. (2021). *Kapitalizm ve Ölüm Dürtüsü* (Ç. Tanyeri, Trans.; 1st ed.). İnka Kitap.
- Han, B.-C. (2022a). *Enfokrası: Dijitalleşme ve Demokrasinin Krizi* (M. Özdemir, Trans.; 1st ed.). Ketebe Yayınları.
- Han, B.-C. (2022b). *Palyatif Toplum: Günümüzde Acı* (H. Barışcan, Trans.; 1st ed.). Metis Yayınları.
- Han, B.-C. (2023). *Ötekini Kovmak: Günümüzde Toplum, Algı ve İletişim* (M. Özdemir, Trans.; 1st ed.). Ketebe Yayınları.
- Han, B.-C. (2024a). *Anlatının Krizi* (M. Erşen, Trans.; 1st ed.). Ketebe Yayınları.
- Han, B.-C. (2024b). *Sürünün İçinde: Dijital Dünyaya Bakışlar* (Z. Sarıkartal, Trans.; 1st ed.). İnka Kitap.
- Han, B.-C. (2024c). *Tefekkür Yaşamı* (B. Tut, Trans.; 1st ed.). Ketebe Yayınları.

- Knepper, S., Stoneman, E., & Wyllie, R. (2024). *Byung-Chul Han: A Critical Introduction*. Polity Press.
- Morgan, J. (2023). Ritual and Otherness in Human Relations: The Human-Person Philosophy of Byung-Chul Han. *Studia Gilsoniana*, 12(2), 309–324. <https://doi.org/10.26385/SG.120211>
- Picchione, J. (2023). Byung-Chul Han: Digital Technologies, Social Exhaustion, and the Decline of Democracy. *New Explorations*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1107743ar>
- Šokčević, Š. (2024). Steven Knepper – Ethan Stoneman – Robert Wyllie , Byung-Chul Han. A Critical Introduction, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2024., 210 str. *Diacovensia*, 32(3), 559–562.
- Suetzl, W. (2017). Beyond the Digital Swarm? Byung-Chul Han's Critical Media Pessimism. *Selected Papers of #AoIR2017: The 18th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers*.
- Wyllie, R., & Knepper, S. (2024). Five Ways to Read Byung-Chul Han. *The Philosopher*, 112(2), 71–77.
- Yeşil, A. (2021). Dijitalleşme, Psikopolitika, Neoliberalizm ve İktidar Teknikleri. *TRT Akademi*, 6(12), 636–643. <https://doi.org/10.37679/trta.945284>
- Yıldırım, A., & Şimşek, H. (2016). *Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri* (10th ed.). Seçkin.

Self-Exploitation, Transparency, and Control: Byung-Chul Han's Perspective on Social Media

İsmail KAPLAN (Asst. Prof. Dr.)

Extended Abstract

The digital age has radically changed the way individuals communicate, access information, and express themselves. Social media is one of the most significant drivers of this change. Byung-Chul Han is a philosopher who critically examines the new social structure and its effects on individuals. Drawing on his interdisciplinary background, Han critically analyzes media, culture, and digital communication. Drawing from modern Western philosophy and postmodern thought, Han analyzes the transformation of society under neoliberal policies.

By analyzing the main characteristics of the age we live in, Han discusses how individuals are shaped through social media. According to him, today's society is no longer a disciplinary society as defined by Foucault, but a 'society of performance'. In this society, individuals are subjected to self-exploitation not under external pressure, but by exerting pressure on themselves. The individual, who constantly optimizes himself/herself under the pressure of performance, encounters problems such as burnout, depression and anxiety in this process.

One of Han's other important concepts is the 'transparency society'. According to him, the fact that everything becomes transparent in the digital age causes individuals to lose their privacy. Social media has become an area where individuals constantly exhibit themselves, are watched by others and act under the pressure of being watched. This situation leads to the superficialization of individuals and the disappearance of the concept of otherness.

The main purpose of this study is to understand how individuals and society are shaped in the digital age by analyzing Han's criticisms of social media. The study discusses the effects of social media on individuals and society in the light of concepts such as 'self-exploitation', 'transparency society', 'burnout society' and 'surveillance' developed by Han. The study analyzes Han's discussions on social media and examines how these platforms transform modern society. In the study, the chapters on social media in 11 of Han's works translated into Turkish were analyzed using an inductive method. The findings were evaluated under the themes of "The Nature of Social Media," "Surveillance," "Superficiality and Sameness," "Infodemic and Manipulation," "Public Sphere," "Destruction of Narratives," and "Extreme Positivity and Psychological Disorders."

Han argues that while social media appears to liberate individuals, it actually functions as a mechanism of control and manipulation. According to him, social media forces individuals to stay constantly connected and thus shortens their attention spans. Digital media exposes individuals to short and rapidly consumed information instead of real narratives.

In the digital age, individuals are monitored in a different way than traditional surveillance. Han revises Bentham's concept of panopticon and argues that the digital panopticon encourages individuals to voluntarily produce data. By constantly sharing content on social media, individuals make themselves visible and thus mediate their own exploitation.

Han states that social media pushes individuals to superficiality and causes everyone to look alike by eliminating differences. Social media causes individuals to be trapped in their own echo chambers, thus reducing the possibility of critical thinking and exposure to different views.

Digital communication facilitates the spread of fake news and manipulation. According to Han, social media algorithms can manipulate individuals by exposing them to restricted information streams. This weakens individuals' critical thinking skills and makes them vulnerable to disinformation.

Han argues that social media destroys the public sphere and distances individuals from a common culture of discussion. Since digital media confines individuals to echo chambers in their private spheres, a true public discussion environment cannot be created.

Han also states that in the age of social media, grand narratives are replaced by rapidly consumed information. The disappearance of narratives weakens individuals' sense of belonging and erodes the collective memory of society. This situation causes individuals to turn towards more superficial and instant emotions.

Han states that social media forces individuals to constantly be happy and successful, which leads to psychological disorders. Social media causes individuals to constantly seek likes and approval. This process causes individuals to detach from reality and face problems such as depression.

Byung-Chul Han's critiques of social media provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the effects of the digital age on individuals. He emphasizes that social media transforms individuals through mechanisms such as transparency, self-exploitation, and superficiality. While social media pressures individuals to continuously optimize themselves, it also subjects them to issues such as burnout, depression, and narcissism.

Han argues that the way out of this process is for individuals to reject the culture of speed and constant connectivity. Adopting alternative lifestyles such as deep thought, meditation and slowness can help protect individuals from the negative effects of the digital age.

Keywords: Social Media, Transparency, Self-Exploitation, Surveillance, Echo Chambers.

Bu makale **intihal tespit yazılımlarıyla** taranmıştır. İntihal tespit edilmemiştir.

This article has been scanned by **plagiarism detection softwares**. No plagiarism detected.

Bu çalışmada "**Yükseköğretim Kurumları Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Yönergesi**" kapsamında uyulması belirtilen kurallara uyulmuştur.

In this study, the rules stated in the "**Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive**" were followed.

Araştırma tek bir yazar tarafından yürütülmüştür.

The research was conducted by a single author.

Çalışma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile **çıkar çatışması** bulunmamaktadır.

There is no **conflict of interest** with any institution or person within the scope of the study.