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Sosyal Medyaı Anlamlandırmak: Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Sözcük Tercihleri Üzerinden Bir İnceleme

Understanding Social Media: An Analysis Through University Students' Word Choices

Gülsün BOZKURT¹

Öz

Bir iletişim sosyoloğu olan Eric Maigret'in medya etkileri üzerine düşünmenin zorluğunu ortaya koymak için önerdiği bir oyun olan "Televizyon insanı... kılar." tümcesinden yola çıkarak tasarlanan bu araştırmada, seçilen sözcük ve gerekçelendirmelerin analizinden katılımcıların sosyal medyaı yaşamlarında nasıl konumlandıklarının anlaşılması amaçlanmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda transkriptlerinde en az bir sosyal medya dersi almış ve üniversite son sınıf öğrencisi olan 65 katılımcı ile görüşülmüştür. Katılımcıların yanıtları incelenerek, seçilen kelimeler "psikolojik etkiler", "sosyal etkileşim ve davranış etkisi" ve "kişilik etkisi" olarak belirlenen üç ana tema altında olumlu ve olumsuz olarak gruplandırılmıştır. Araştırma, sosyal medyanın iletişim ve bilgi paylaşımı, haberdar olma gibi konularda önemli bir araç olarak görüldüğü ancak bağımlılık, asosyalite ve yalnızlık gibi sosyal ve psikolojik açıdan da ciddi riskler taşıdığına işaret etmektedir. Öğrencilerin gözünden bir sosyal medya anlatısı ortaya koyan bu araştırmada sosyal medyanın bir iletişim ağı olarak sağladıklarından öte özellikle genç bireyler üzerindeki diğer etkilerinin saptanması önemlidir. Ayrıca çalışmanın, gençlerin yaşamında sosyal medyanın rolü üzerine yapılacak daha detaylı araştırmalar için de bir zemin oluşturacağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Medya, Üniversite Öğrencileri, Sözcük Seçimi, Medya Etkileri, Tematik Analiz

Abstract

This study which is inspired by the game called "Television makes a person..." that is proposed by communication sociologist Eric Maigret to mention the challenges of thinking about media effects, aims to understand how participants position social media in their lives by analyzing their word choices and justifications. In this context, 65 final year students, who had taken at least one course related to social media, were interviewed. By analyzing the participants' responses, chosen words were categorized under three main themes with both positive and negative groups: "Psychological effects", "social interaction and behavioral effects" and "personality effects". The findings indicate that while social media is considered as a significant tool for communication, information sharing, and being informed but also poses serious social and psychological risks such as addiction, asociality and loneliness. The study presents a social media narrative from the students' perspective, emphasizing the importance of identifying the broader effects of social media on young individuals beyond its function as a communication network. In addition to that, this research is expected to be a foundation for further and more in-depth studies about the role of social media in the lives of young people.

Keywords: Social Media, University Students, Word Choice, Media Effects, Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

The increasing integration of digitalization into daily life has led various applications and platforms to occupy a critical place in the center of lives. The transformation of traditional social spaces has made digital platforms influential in shaping young people's social interactions, emotions, and individual perceptions. As a key component of the digital age, social media not only allows individuals to interact, create, and share content but also introduces a new form of communication and engagement. Young individuals, in particular, use social media not only as a means of communication but also as a space where they build their identities, establish social connections, and share emotional experiences.

Social media platforms have become a crucial medium which shapes youth's social lives, emotions and thoughts. In this regard, young people's increasing reliance on information obtained through social media for their life experiences has become a problem which needs to be examined seriously. Social media does not merely alter self-expression methods, it also shapes social identities and worldviews of individuals.

This study aims to understand students' interactions with social media platforms by analyzing the arguments behind the words they choose and to explore how they define these platforms. The research question, 'Social media makes people...,' was deliberately chosen to challenge participants' pre-existing academic and conventional knowledge of social media. While these students had taken at least one social media course and possessed theoretical insights, this open-ended question encouraged them to critically reflect on their own lived experiences with social media. The focus on word choice and personal justification aimed to reveal both the diversity and the underlying patterns in their perceptions, providing a deeper understanding of how academically informed young users frame social media in relation to their daily lives. At the core of the research is the statement 'Social media makes a person...' directed at the participants. The three words participants choose to complete the sentence along with their justifications, are critical in concretizing their experiences and thoughts about social media. This is because the selection of words and their justification help us understand participants' relationships with social media and the impact these platforms have on their lives.

Given that individuals often compare themselves to others in online environments, this can significantly influence their emotional states. The research aims to reveal the thoughts and emotional processes behind the words students use when defining social media. The words students choose to express their social media experiences are influenced not only by their personal thoughts but also by the content they observe and they are exposed to on social media. In this context, it can be said that social media not only creates positive and negative effects in the lives of young people, but also shapes their social interactions and communication styles.

Social media plays a significant role in modern society, influencing daily life, relationships, and self-perception. Understanding its far-reaching effects is essential for grasping young people's perceptions and experiences. This study serves as a foundation for more in-depth research on the positive and negative impacts of social media, contributing to a broader understanding of its role in youth culture. The research sample consists of senior university students who actively use social media platforms and have academic knowledge in the field. Based on the



collected data, three main themes related to social media usage have been identified. The research reveals individuals' awareness beyond the characteristics of social media, the positive and negative effects of social media on individuals, the words students choose when defining social media, the justifications behind these word choices, and the gender differences in word selection.

1. Social Media Studies

One of the primary reasons for the rapid increase in social media research in recent years is the pervasive influence of social media in all aspects of life. Today, people use social media not only to manage their social relationships but also to construct their identities, express political opinions, and participate in social movements. Therefore, understanding the effects of social media on individuals has become increasingly critical for social life. Additionally, technological developments and the rapid diversification of social media platforms have enriched research topics. Initially, studies focused on the history, significance, and characteristics of the concept. However, with the rise of social media platforms, research has expanded to cover topics such as social media addiction, cyberbullying, privacy concerns, and the social, cultural, and psychological effects of these platforms.

Early social media research primarily focused on how social media was used, the demographic characteristics of users, and its role as a new communication tool contributing to social dynamics.

Some of the early academic studies on social media include "Social Media as a New Communication Environment: A Study on Ege University Faculty of Communication" development of social media as a new communication medium. This research explored the new environments created by communication technologies and their effects on individuals' daily lives. It highlighted how social media facilitates making friends, exchanging social and political ideas, and even making significant life decisions such as marriage. The study emphasized that social media platforms were particularly popular among young people in terms of their usability. The study concluded that internet and social media usage has been increasing both in Turkey and worldwide, significantly transforming daily life practices—from news consumption to shopping, from communication to entertainment (Vural & Bat, 2010, p. 3372).

In the same year, "The Effects of the Gümüş TV Series on Arab Public Opinion: A Social Media Analysis" (Deniz, 2010) examined the influence of social media on popular culture. Another study from 2010, titled "A Study on Member Loyalty in Social Networking Sites" (Hacıfendioğlu, 2010) analyzed the factors affecting member loyalty in social networking sites and the degree of influence of these factors. The study emphasized that social networking sites were also significant as marketing tools. Based on the analysis of data collected through face-to-face surveys with 548 social media users, it was found that the variety and quality of services offered on social networking sites, the trust environment established, the member profile and sensitivity, as well as content and design factors, play important roles in user loyalty. The study found that the trust factor was the most influential in ensuring member loyalty, followed by member profiles, service variety and quality, and member sensitivity. It shows that it is crucial for social networking sites to develop strategies focusing on these factors to gain a competitive advantage.



Altunay (2010) examined the relationship between social media, everyday life, and user engagement. Focusing on Twitter, this study sought to determine the usage purposes and motivations of a group considered as “prosumer” (producer-consumer) in relation to their daily lives (Altunay, 2010, p. 40). The study concluded that participants’ relationships with Twitter were intertwined with their daily lives, and each user had developed a personalized routine for engaging with the platform.

Among the early social media studies, topics such as social movements, digital citizenship, and political interactions were also prominent. For instance, a detailed study by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe examined how Facebook contributed to social capital among university students (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Their research explored Facebook’s role in strengthening and maintaining individuals’ social ties, emphasizing the support of weak ties and the enhancement of offline social relationships through online platforms. The study demonstrated that Facebook was effective in both fostering new connections and maintaining existing ones among university students. Furthermore, it highlighted the correlation between social capital levels, individuals’ psychological well-being, and overall life satisfaction. In this context, the research explained how social media functions as a tool for supporting individuals’ social integration. At the time, studies focusing on social media generally reported positive findings regarding its role in strengthening relationships between individuals and groups. However, more recent research has begun to investigate the varying effects of social media use on individuals.

A systematic review conducted by Lopes et al. (Lopes et al., 2022) examined the relationship between social media use and depression and anxiety. Out of 1,747 studies reviewed, 159 met the inclusion criteria. The findings suggested a bidirectional relationship between social media use and mental health issues: individuals with depression or anxiety tended to use social media more intensively, while those who engaged in excessive social media use were also more likely to develop symptoms of depression or anxiety. The study identified a strong correlation between problematic social media use—characterized by symptoms of addiction, excessive time spent online, and sensitivity to negative feedback—and increased levels of depression and anxiety. Although a direct linear relationship between total time spent on social media and the severity of symptoms was not found, spending more than four hours per day on social media was generally considered harmful. Additionally, passive users—those who primarily observe content rather than actively engage with it—were found to be at higher risk for developing depression symptoms. The study also showed that women were more vulnerable to depression and anxiety triggered by social media, whereas in men, social media use related to gaming was more likely to yield negative outcomes. Late-night social media use was linked to sleep disturbances and higher anxiety levels. Moreover, social comparison tendencies—particularly regarding physical attractiveness—were more pronounced among women, accelerate symptoms of anxiety and depression. The findings emphasized the importance of mindful and controlled social media usage and the need for further studies to better understand the effects of problematic social media engagement.

A study by Pedalino and Camerini (2022) investigated the impact of Instagram use on body dissatisfaction among young women. The research utilized a mediating model to examine the relationship between different Instagram usage types—such as browsing others’ images,



commenting, and sharing personal content—and body dissatisfaction. Specifically, the study explored how these interactions were shaped by upward social comparisons involving social media influencers, close peers, and distant acquaintances. Research has shown that browsing others' images on Instagram is associated with lower levels of body appreciation through upward social comparisons with social media influencers. However, activities such as commenting on others' images and sharing personal content were not found to have a significant relationship with body dissatisfaction. Additionally, it was determined that adolescent girls had lower levels of body dissatisfaction compared to young adult women, and higher Body Mass Index (BMI) values were associated with greater body dissatisfaction. The study emphasizes the negative effects of idealized images presented by social media influencers on young women, suggesting that these images may contribute to increased body dissatisfaction. Researchers propose that interventions such as body positivity movements and media literacy programs could be effective in mitigating these adverse effects.

A report published by the United States Department of Health Services (2023) comprehensively examined the negative effects of social media addiction, cyberbullying, and exposure to harmful content on the psychological health of young people. The report highlighted that social media poses a threat to youth mental health by facilitating access to harmful content and increasing incidents of cyberbullying. Twenge et al. (2022) analyzed the effects of social media on depression and suicidal tendencies in adolescents, identifying a parallel increase between social media use and these psychological issues. Similarly, Daly, (Daly, 2022) investigated the connection between rising depression rates among young people in the United States and social media usage, drawing attention to the adverse mental health consequences associated with increased social media engagement.

1.1. Studies on Dergipark with the Keyword “Social Media”

When a search is made by typing ‘social media’ in DergiPark, it is seen that there are many studies on social media in different disciplines. In these studies; it is seen that different topics such as the positive and negative aspects of social media use, ethical problems arising with social media, the relationship between social media and addiction, social, cultural and economic effects of social media, hate speech spread on social media, new formations developing with social media are focused on.

For example, Güler et al. (Güler et al., 2019) examined the issue of increasing addiction due to the widespread use of the internet in their study titled “A Study on Social Media Addiction Among University Students.” This research analyzed different dimensions of social media addiction among university students. A previously developed survey was utilized to assess students' levels of social media addiction. In addition to this questionnaire, additional data were collected, including participants' sociodemographic information, their purposes for using social media, the number of social media accounts they owned, the average time they spent daily on social media, and their overall social media usage patterns. A factor analysis conducted on the 41-item survey on social media addiction identified six factors related to addiction: “interference with social life,” “reduction in responsibility awareness,” “inability to control addiction,” “psychological effects,” “the relationship between emotional state and addiction,” and “the impact of addiction on daily routines”, (Güler et al., 2019, p. 12). The findings indicated that students' social media addiction levels were increasing and that



excessive engagement with social media limited the time they could dedicate to hobbies and social interactions. University students participating in the study reported that their productivity declined due to social media use, that they struggled to quit using social media, and that they continuously postponed their decisions to disconnect. Additionally, participants noted that their habit of constantly checking social media caused delays in completing necessary tasks. The study also found that social media was frequently used as a means of escaping personal problems and avoiding real-life challenges.

Another study by Kiran et al. (2020), titled “An Examination of the Effects of Social Media Use on Individuals,” was based on a multi-section survey. The first section included questions about participants’ demographic characteristics and their computer, internet, and social media usage. The second section aimed to determine the purposes of participants' social media use, while the third section explored the effects of social media use on daily life and the psychological impact of social media posts. The final section assessed social media addiction levels. The study investigated whether individuals from different age groups and professional backgrounds exhibited signs of social media addiction based on their usage habits.

In the section addressing the impact of social media on daily life, various factors were examined, including neglecting family members and friends, failing to fulfill academic or work-related responsibilities, prioritizing social media over leisure and relaxation activities, skipping meals, and experiencing disruptions in sleep patterns. Under the category of the psychological effects of social media posts, factors such as the positive emotional impact of receiving likes on posts, the influence of comments (both positive and negative), the absence of anxiety about the number of followers, the tendency to seek approval from close friends before posting, modeling others’ posts, and the level of engagement with the posts of followed accounts were analyzed. Finally, the section on social media addiction levels explored various aspects of compulsive social media use, including a persistent curiosity about online activities, preoccupation with the thought of using social media, excessive time spent on social media beyond initial plans, prioritizing social media over other responsibilities, losing track of time while using social media, and self-identification as a social media addict (Kiran et al., 2020, p. 437). The research findings indicate that social media addiction and the impact of social media posts on individuals show significant differences based on gender.

Gürgan and Demirel (2021) in their study titled “The Effects of Adolescents' Social Media Use on Their Social Relationships and Social Anxiety Levels”, examined the relationship between adolescents' social media use, their social relationships, and their levels of social anxiety. The study was conducted with the participation of 363 adolescents aged 14-18, and data were collected using the “Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents” and the “Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents.” The findings revealed that gender had a significant effect on social media addiction and social anxiety levels. Moreover, social media use was found to have both positive and negative impacts on social relationships, while excessive use contributed to increased social anxiety. The study provides valuable insights into how social media influences adolescents' daily lives and evaluates its connection with social relationships.

Baş et al. (2023) investigated which social media platforms young adults aged 18-29 use, how frequently they use them, and what types of content they share in their study titled "An



Analysis of Social Media Usage and Content Sharing Patterns Among Young Adults in Turkey.” This study, which examined the social media habits and content-sharing preferences of young adults in Turkey in the context of sociodemographic characteristics, was conducted through face-to-face surveys with 1,537 young people across 12 cities. The findings indicated that Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter were the most popular platforms, whereas Facebook had lost its popularity. It was also observed that personal content was predominant in social media posts, while content reflecting political or religious views was generally avoided. Socioeconomic status, age, and sexual orientation were found to significantly influence platform preferences and content types. The research provides comprehensive data on young people’s use of digital media.

Çağlayan and Arslantaş (2023), in their study titled “Factors Affecting Social Media Addiction in University Students and the Relationship of Social Media Addiction with Depression and Fear of Missing Developments”, focused on the double-sided effects of fear of missing developments and social media addiction. It aims to investigate the factors affecting social media addiction in university students and the relationship of addiction with depression and fear of missing developments. The cross-sectional study was conducted with the participation of 448 university students. The findings showed that social media addiction was higher in females, and addiction decreased with increasing age. Daily social media usage time and use for sharing purposes increased the level of addiction, while depression and fear of missing out on developments also showed a positive relationship with addiction. The study provides an important resource for understanding the impact of social media addiction on individuals’ psychosocial conditions and developing prevention strategies.

When the studies on social media are roughly analysed, it can be said that the early studies aimed at defining, explaining and describing the characteristics of the concept have evolved towards questioning the effects of platforms on users from a critical perspective.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore university students’ perceptions of social media through their spontaneous word choices and the meanings they attribute to those choices. The research is inspired by Éric Maigret’s (2003) conceptual exercise “Television makes people...,” which aims to provoke critical thinking about media effects. In this context, the adapted prompt “Social media makes people...” was used to elicit participants’ personalized and experience-based responses.

The participants of the study were 65 fourth-year students enrolled in a private university in Istanbul, all of whom had taken at least one social media course. These students were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that participants had both academic knowledge and practical experience in using social media platforms. Out of 70 students who were initially involved, three were excluded due to pilot testing, and two were removed for failing to provide justifications for their responses. The final sample consisted of 29 males and 36 females. The number of participants (65) reflects both the total number of eligible students during the data collection period and the desire to explore the full range of word choices. Although thematic saturation was observed around the 60th participant, the data collection was extended slightly to 65 students to allow for the possibility of unique or unexpected word



choices. This design choice aligns with the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on capturing the nuances of participants' personal experiences. Single private university was used for the study. However, the participation of students from different departments increased data diversity and allowed for a multi-dimensional understanding of their perceptions of social media. The aim of the study was not generalization but rather an in-depth exploration of students' social media experiences within a specific context.

Data were collected through a written form that included the incomplete sentence "Social media makes people...". Participants were instructed to complete the sentence using three different words and to provide a justification for each choice. This format was chosen to ensure that each response was based on the participant's personal experience, minimizing the risk of misinterpretation. This approach ensured that the meaning of each word was directly provided by the participant, grounding the analysis in the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's assumptions. By focusing on word selection and justification, the research sought to uncover the underlying psychological, social, and identity-related associations that participants describe social media. Also, this open-ended format was designed to encourage participants to reflect on their personal experiences rather than abstract definitions, enabling a deeper understanding of their emotional and cognitive associations with social media. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, and confidentiality was assured.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) 1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. All participant responses were transcribed and coded manually (Saldaña, 2013, p. 2). Since the small number of participants and the fact that a justified data set was requested from the participants, the entire six-phase process was carried out by the researcher himself. But, another researcher, that is specialized in qualitative research, supported to assure that thematic consistency was ensured through repeated data checks and comparisons between participants' feedback. This validation process ensured thematic clarity and coherence. The analysis focused on exploring the diversity and recurrence of word choices and the contextual meanings behind them.

Words and justifications were examined through open coding, and similar codes were grouped under three main themes. Psychological Effects (e.g., lonely, unhappy, depressed), Social Interaction and Behavioral Effects (e.g., social, current, interactive), Personality Effects (e.g., free, expressive, comparative)

Theme assignment was based on the contextual interpretation of participants' justifications rather than on the literal meaning of the words. For instance, the word "free" was categorized differently depending on whether it referred to emotional liberation, access to information, or freedom of self-expression. Cases of ambiguity between psychological and personality-related themes were resolved through close semantic analysis of the explanations

The study received ethical approval from the Nişantaşı University Ethics Committee on May 2, 2024 (Approval No. 2024/05). All participants gave informed consent, and their identities were anonymized using codes (e.g., P1, P2) to maintain confidentiality.



3. Findings

In this study, university students' perceptions of social media were analysed through the words they chose. The findings revealing that the words that the participants associate with social media are mostly positive show that social media is associated with words such as 'freedom', 'social interaction' and 'information sharing'. It is noteworthy that the word 'freedom' is consistently preferred under different themes in the selection of words associated with social media. This shows that social media is perceived as a tool that supports the freedom of individuals to express themselves and access information.

In the research, words that we can associate with the characteristics of social media stand out in the participants' word choices that will be included in the category of "Social Interaction and Behavioural Effects". Words such as 'Social', 'Participatory', 'Current', 'Informed', 'Active', 'Sharing' indicate the basic features directly associated with social media platforms. All word choices of three participants are included under positive effects in the category of 'Social Interaction and Behavioural Effects'.

Table 1. Words chosen by the female students



Gender	Psychological Impacts		Social Interaction & Behavioral Impact		Personality Impacts	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
P1		Lonely	Free, Critical			
P3	Happy		Free	Addict		
P4			Intellectual		Open Minded, Aware	
P7			Social, Critical			Prejudiced
P9		Depressive, Narcissist		Superficial		
P10				Addict	Responsible	Expectant
P12			Free, Aware	Addict		
P13	Belonging		Knowledgeable, Informed			
P14		Vulnerable		Addict		Manipulative
P19			Free, Participant		Productive	
P22			Free, Sharing		Productive	
P23	Free	Captivating	Actual			
P24			Efficient, Actual			Crucial
P25			Free, Social, Productive			
P27			Knowledgeable, Informed		Positive	
P28			Free, Active, Innovative			
P31			Free, Informed	Addict		
P32		Pessimistic		Addict		Asocial
P33			Free, Informed	Addict		
P34			Free	Addict		Impulsive
P35		Unhappy		Envious		Fake
P37			Free, Social, Actual			
P38		Depressive	Actual	Fake		
P39				Compelled	Successful	Unqualified
P45	Comfortable		Free		Unique	
P48		Aimless				Fake, Asocial
P49			Free, Social		Entrepreneur	
P50			Free, Social, Knowledgeable			
P51			Active, Actual		Knowledgeable	
P53			Accessible, Sharing			Talkative
P56		Unhappy	Free	Accessible		
P57	Free			Captivating	Successful	
P58			Knowledgeable, Cultured		Curious	
P60			Free	Addict	Unique	
P61	Happy		Free, Fearless			
P62		Pessimistic	Fast		Strong	

Differences were found in word preferences and justifications between male and female participants. While female participants tended to use more negative words, it was observed that male participants approached social media from a more positive perspective. In the study, it was observed that female participants used more negative words about social media. The fact that female participants use more negative words in evaluating social media suggests that social media may have a more complex effect on these individuals. These differences indicate that the experiences of social media users may vary based on gender. Similarly, the research findings of Lopes et al. (2022) showed that social comparisons on social media platforms caused more significant unhappiness and anxiety among women. It is possible to say that gender differences in word choice also support previous studies on this subject.



Table 2. Words chosen by the male students

Gender	Psychological Impacts		Social Interaction & Behavioral Impact		Personality Impacts	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
P2	Happy		Timeless			Insatiable
P5		Depressive	Free		Unique	
P6		Jealous		Asocial		Insecure
P8	Special		Free		Creative	
P11		Dangerous	Knowledgeable			Fake
P15	Strong			Vulnerable, Robot		
P16			Social, Active		Aware	
P17			Social, Aware		Creative	
P18	Precious, Positive				Curious	
P20				Asocial	Knowledgeable	Fake
P21	Secure		Effective		Successful	
P26			Free, Smart		Unique	
P29			Social, Knowledgeable	Addict		
P30		Dynamic			Free, Successful	
P36			Social, Actual		Knowledgeable	
P40	Strong	Lonely		Reachable		
P41		Desperate	Strong	Hollow		
P42				Addict, Foolish		Outsider
P43	Free					Addict, Ignorant
P44			Actual		Intellectual, Social	
P46			Visible, Accessible		Productive	
P47		Thoughtful	Free, Business Owner			
P52	Free	Dreamer			Creative	
P54		Exhausted				Asocial, Insecure
P55			Social		Knowledgeable, Productive	
P59			Free		Creative, Aware	
P63	Free		Fast	Unlimited		
P64		Hopeless	Social		Strong	
P65		Lonely	Knowledgeable		Social	

The total number of responses was 195 words (3 per participant), each accompanied by detailed explanations that clarified their meaning and context.

Since the main theme under which the words chosen by the participants will take place is determined according to how the participant justifies the word chosen by the participant, the same word can take place under different main themes. In the table, it is seen that the participants evaluated social media mostly with positive words. It is possible to say that social media is perceived positively especially in the themes of 'social interaction and behaviour effect' and 'personality effect'. The word 'free' is included in the positive effects of each category. Among the participants, there were those who stated that they felt freer thanks to social media, as well as those who drew attention to the freedom experienced in accessing and sharing information and those who stated that they could make their choices freely.

Research findings showed that the psychological effects of social media are based on the participants' own experiences and these effects are generally perceived negatively. For example, by choosing words such as 'unhappy' and 'lonely', it was emphasized that social media pushes individuals to compare themselves with others and as a result of this comparison, they feel inadequate. These findings seem to be consistent with the studies of Twenge et al. (2022) on the relationship between social media and depression and anxiety.

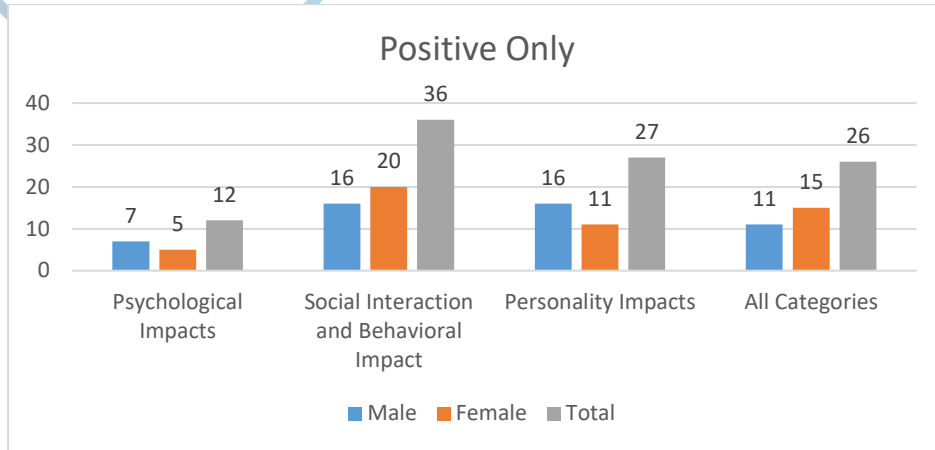


We can say that the words in the Social Interaction and Behavioural Effects category are words that reflect the characteristics of social media. The word preferences under this category indicate the participants' prior knowledge about the concept of social media rather than their own experiences. Attention was drawn to the positive functions of social media such as communication, socialisation, interaction, participation and being informed. However, the negative aspects of social media were also mentioned; for example, it was stated that social media may have an isolating effect by distancing individuals from face-to-face communication.

Personality Effects; the findings in the category of personal effects showed that social media is related to the freedom of individuals to express themselves and the creativity space it creates. For example, the words 'free' and 'creative' were frequently used in a positive way. However, some of the participants also emphasized the negative effects of social media such as comparing with others and devaluing their own lives with seemingly perfect lives. When individuals get lost in the idealized perfection of others, they end up in a state of constant unhappiness. This situation is in line with the findings of Pedalino and Camerini's (2022) research on the effects of Instagram use on body dissatisfaction.

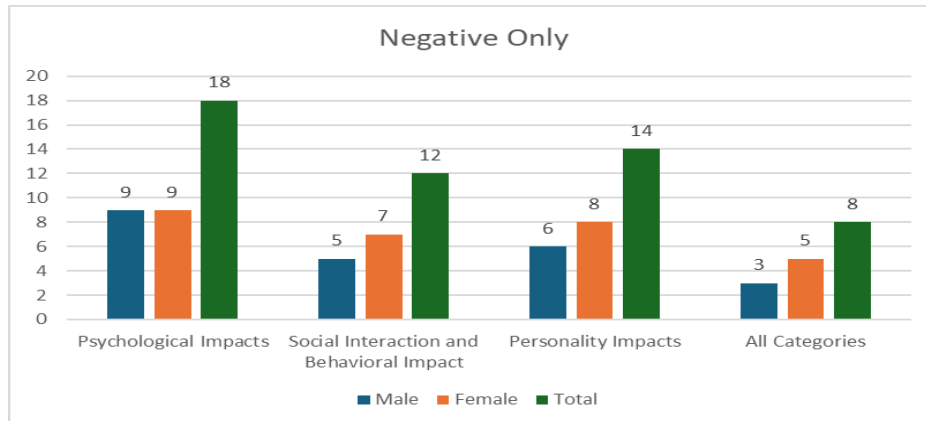
In the study, the positive words chosen by female participants to define social media such as "free" and "happy" can be interpreted as a subtle reference to the meanings that television, as a mass communication medium, has historically held for women. Television, which has played a significant role in reinforcing gender roles, has for many years represented a world in which women could empathize with different life stories and feel a sense of freedom and happiness. In contrast, for men, television has been positioned more as a medium connected to the real world. This distinction becomes apparent in the types of content consumed: while women are often exposed to exaggerated daytime shows, cooking programs, and fictionalized dramas, men tend to consume more serious content such as news, informational programming, and sports both on television and on social media. This suggests that so-called "new" social media consumption habits may actually reflect the established representations and patterns of older mass communication tools. Therefore, if the central question of this study "Social media makes people ..." were rephrased as "Social media makes woman ..." or "Social media makes man ...," it would be intriguing to examine whether the participants' word choices would reflect the media's influence on gender roles, or whether distinctly different words would be selected by each group. Research on the subject points to the importance of improving young people's awareness of social media use. In this direction, it is important both to better understand the current effects of social media and to develop educational programmes that will raise awareness. The transformation of media literacy courses in universities towards learning the critical evaluation of social media content is a fundamental step in this field.





Graphic 1. Positive only words according to categories

Students who selected positive words tended to associate social media with empowerment, creativity, and personal freedom. For instance, P1 (Female) emphasized, ‘Social media makes people free, because platforms allow us to express feelings and opinions without restrictions,’ while, P8 (Male) noted, ‘Social media makes people creative, as it pushes users to produce unique content.’ Similarly, P19 (Female) underlined the productive aspect: ‘Social media allows people to express themselves freely and be productive by creating content.’ P21 (Male) viewed social media as a gateway to success, explaining, ‘Social media makes people successful; it creates opportunities for entrepreneurship and visibility.’ Finally, P45 (Female) stressed individuality: ‘Social media allows individuals to exist as themselves, expressing their identity and ideas without barriers.’ These reflections highlight that students perceive social media not only as a communication tool but also as a means of self-expression, creative engagement, and opportunity.



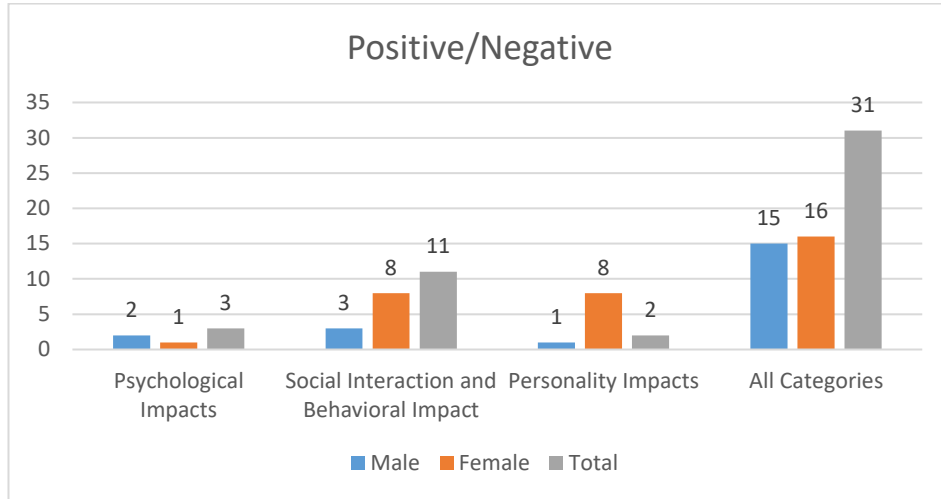
Graphic 2. Negative only words according to categories

Students who selected negative words focused on the psychological and social drawbacks of social media. P6 (Male) explained, ‘People share only their happiest moments, which leads to jealousy and self-doubt,’ while P9 (Female) described the emotional volatility caused by the mix of tragic and happy news: ‘The mix of tragic and happy news on social media disrupts our emotional state.’ P10 (Female) criticized the manipulative nature of platforms: ‘Social media manipulates users and creates a constant need for validation.’ P32 (Female) associated

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overuse with isolation, stating, ‘Spending too much time online leads to isolation and pessimism.’ Likewise, P48 (Female) emphasized issues of authenticity: ‘People behave as if they are someone else online, often hiding behind filters and false images.’ These examples illustrate students’ critical awareness of social media’s potential to distort self-perception, damage mental health, and foster shallow connections.



Graphic 3. Positive and negative words according to categories

Several students selected both positive and negative words, reflecting the dual nature of social media as both empowering and harmful. For instance, P3 (Female) described this ambivalence: ‘Social media is fun and liberating, but it can easily become addictive.’ P25 (Female) highlighted the tension between productivity and overload: ‘Being online makes people social and productive, yet the constant exposure can also be overwhelming.’ P30 (Male) commented on the emotional shifts caused by trends: ‘Social media belongs to you and can lead to success, but the rapidly changing trends affect your emotions.’ P33 (Female) pointed out the paradox of freedom and dependency: ‘Social media is a space of freedom, but heavy usage leads to dependency.’ Lastly, P57 (Female) summarized the dilemma: ‘Social media opens the doors to new worlds but can make face-to-face communication fade.’ These mixed perspectives suggest that students recognize both the opportunities and risks inherent in digital environments, aligning with recent studies on the ambivalence of social media (Twenge et al., 2022).

Of the 65 participants, 29 were male and 36 were female. Among the male participants, 7 used only positive words in the Psychological (Mood) category, 16 in the Social Interaction and Behavioural Effects category, and 16 in the Personality Effects category. The number of male participants who used positive words in all categories was 11. Among the female participants, 5 used only positive words in the Psychological (Mood) category, 20 in the Social Interaction and Behavioral Effects category, and 11 in the Personality Effects category. The number of female participants who used positive words in all categories was 15.

Among the male participants, 9 used only negative words in the Psychological (Mood) category, 5 in the Social Interaction and Behavioral Effects category, and 6 in the Personality Effects category. The number of male participants who used negative words in all categories was 3. Of the female participants, 9 used only negative words in the Psychological (Mood)

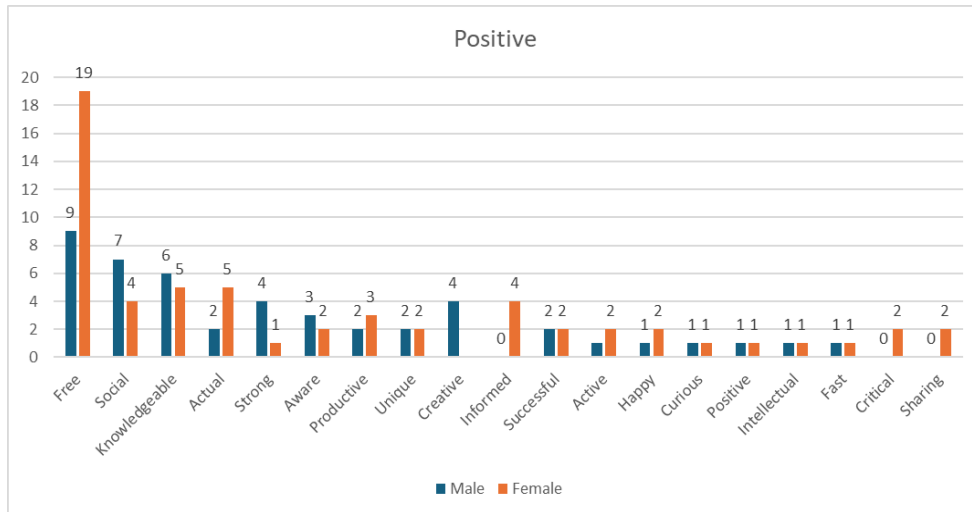
category, 7 in the Social Interaction and Behavioral Effects category, and 8 in the Personality Effects category. The number of female participants who used negative words in all categories was 5.

Among the male participants, 2 used both positive and negative words in the Psychological (Mood) category, 3 in the Social Interaction and Behavioral Effects category, and 1 in the Personality Effects category. The number of male participants who used both positive and negative words in all categories was 15. Among the female participants, 1 used both positive and negative words in the Psychological (Mood) category, 8 in the Social Interaction and Behavioral Effects category, and 8 in the Personality Effects category. The number of female participants who used both positive and negative words in all categories was 16.

In summary, female participants used negative words more frequently. The following tables show the graphical form of the analysis

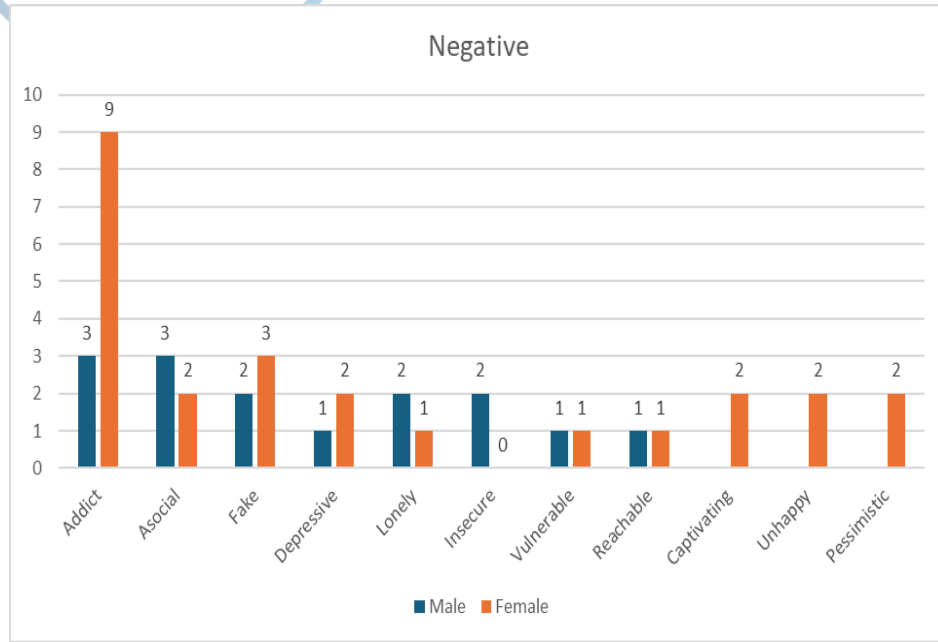
In summary; female participants used negative words at a higher rate. The following tables show the graphical form of the analysis.

The differences between the participants' gender-based word preferences are also striking. The fact that female participants used more negative words when describing social media indicates that these individuals may feel the psychological pressure and social comparison effects of social media use more intensely. Male participants, on the other hand, preferred words such as free and social, which emphasise the benefits of social media more frequently. These findings reveal that gender roles are effective on social media perception.



Graphic 4. Indicator of the most frequently used positive words

There are 19 different positive words related to social media used only once. Among these words; 'Cultured', 'Comfortable', 'Entrepreneurial', 'Effective', 'Business owner', 'Fearless', 'Visible', 'Open-minded', Accessible', "Belonging", "Innovative", "Responsible", "Smart", "Safe", "Valuable", "Special", "Timeless", "Participatory". Other words chosen by the participants who expressed the positive aspects of social media through their own experiences were repeated more than once.



Graphic 5. Indicator of negative words used

27 negative words were used only once. Although there are words under all three main themes among these words, the majority of them are under the category of psychological and personality effects. The most frequently used word 'dependent' is followed by negative words such as 'asocial', 'fake', 'lonely', 'depressed'.

Table 3. First Word Preference

	Number of Participant	First Preference Positive	First Preference Negative	First Positive Preference "Free"	First Negative Preference "Addict"
Male	29	23	6	9	1
Female	36	27	9	15	2
Total	65	50	15	24	3

It is understood that the word 'Dependent', which is selected at the highest rate in negative preferences, is not the first choice that comes to mind, and is in the 2nd and 3rd place. It is seen that the first positive word preference of 24 of the participants was the word 'Free'.

Conclusion

Social media, unlike traditional media, has a structure that allows users to actively participate in content production and sharing processes. This process, which started with Web 2.0, has expanded the opportunities for users to create content collaboratively and interact instantly. In this framework, social media is considered as a communication medium that differentiates itself from traditional media and adds a new dimension to social interaction by offering fast feedback at zero cost and eliminating time-space limitations. On the other hand, social media also has disadvantages such as the difficulty of content control due to its rapid spread. All these features show that social media has become an important element of global communication and offers a connected communication model among users.

The research question 'Social media makes people...' was intentionally designed to provoke participants to critically reflect on their lived experiences rather than rely on preconceived or

academic definitions. The students' justifications reveal that they associate social media with both personal empowerment (e.g., freedom, creativity, productivity) and socio-cultural pressures (e.g., dependency, approval-seeking, superficiality). This dual perspective reveals that young people, within digital culture, find opportunities for self-actualization while simultaneously being constrained by various social expectations and norms. Based on the findings in both positive and negative dimensions of social media, the study contributes to theoretical discussions on media which both an enabling and disciplining force (Twenge et al., 2022; Lopes et al., 2022). This approach also reflects the socio-cultural realities of young adults in Türkiye, where social media functions as a hybrid space of expression, comparison, and identity construction.

The findings show that social media embodies both empowering aspects, such as freedom and creativity, and negative impacts, including dependency and superficiality. This indicates that social media functions as both an opportunity and a source of pressure for young adults. Particularly in the Turkish context, social media provides self-expression and visibility while simultaneously fostering approval-seeking behaviors and social comparison. Therefore, media literacy initiatives should aim to raise awareness of both the creative potential and psychological risks of digital platforms. Future studies could expand this word-based analysis across different age groups and cultural contexts to further deepen our understanding of social media perceptions.

The findings also reveal that students do not approach social media in a uniform way; rather, their word choices and justifications reflect a dynamic interplay between personal agency and external influences. For example, the recurrent use of words such as 'free' and 'creative' suggests that young people value the autonomy and opportunities for self-expression provided by digital platforms. However, the simultaneous emphasis on words like 'addicted,' 'fake,' or 'lonely' indicates that they are also critically aware of the structural mechanisms—algorithms, trends, and peer pressure—that can diminish personal characteristics. This dual perception aligns with current debates in media studies, which consider digital platforms as both spaces of empowerment and instruments of social control.”

Another key implication of the findings is the role of social media as a site of identity experimentation and social comparison. Students' references to words like 'unique,' 'narcissistic,' and 'manipulative' reveal a heightened awareness of the performative nature of online identities. This awareness might stem from their academic exposure to media theories, which encourages them to question authenticity and representation in digital spaces. These insights highlight the importance of integrating critical thinking about identity, representation, and digital well-being into media literacy programs for young users.

Research on the subject points to the importance of improving young people's awareness of social media use. In this direction, it is important both to better understand the current effects of social media and to develop educational programs that will raise awareness. The transformation of media literacy courses in universities towards learning the critical evaluation of social media content is a fundamental step in this field.

Açıklamalar



* **Etik Kurul Onayı:** Çalışmanın etik açıdan uygun olup olmadığı İstanbul Nişantaşı Üniversitesi Etik Kurulu tarafından, 02/05/2024 tarihli 2024/05 numaralı etik kurul toplantısında değerlendirilerek çalışılması uygun bulunmuştur.

* **Yayın Etiği:** Bu çalışma, “Yükseköğretim Kurumları Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Yönergesi” kapsamında belirtilen kurallara uygun olarak hazırlanmıştır. Ayrıca, makale intihal tespit yazılımlarıyla (Turnitin / iThenticate) taranmış ve herhangi bir intihal tespit edilmemiştir.

* **Yazar Katkı Oranı:** “Uygun değildir”.

* **Çıkar Çatışması:** Çalışmanın yazar(lar)ının veya yazar(lar)ın bağlı olduğu kurumun veya finansal destekçisinin diğer kurumlarla veya bu diğer kurumların çalışanlarıyla araştırmayı etkileyebilecek düzeyde doğrudan veya dolaylı olarak herhangi bir finansal, ticari, hukuki veya profesyonel ilişkisi/çıkartı söz konusu değildir.

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* **Yazar Beyanı:** Çalışma herhangi bir tezden üretilmemiş ve herhangi bir kongre/sempozyum/konferansta sunulmamıştır.

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