

GENÇ YETİŞKİNLERDE SAKAL: MODA MI, İFADE BİÇİMİ Mİ?

BEARD IN YOUNG ADULTS: FASHION OR A FORM OF EXPRESSION?

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Öz

Bu nitel çalışma, genç yetişkin erkekler (18-23 yaş) arasında sakalların sosyokültürel önemini inceleyerek ele almaktadır. 32 katılımcıyla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler ve tematik analiz yoluyla, yüz kıllarının artan popülaritesinin geçici bir trend mi yoksa daha derin bir kimlik inşası biçimi mi olduğunu incelemektedir. Bulgular, sakalların cinsiyet perspektifleri arasında çok yönlü anlamlar taşıdığını ortaya koymaktadır. Erkek katılımcılar sakalları öz güven, özerklik ve duygusal dayanıklılıkla ilişkilendirmiş ve onları olgunluk ve bağımsızlığın sembolleri olarak görmüşlerdir. Kadın katılımcılar ise sakalları erkeklik, sosyal statü ve çekicilikle ilişkilendirmiş ve genellikle temiz traşlı yüzleri daha az iddialı veya "çocuksu" olarak algılamışlardır. Çalışma, kişisel bakım tercihleri ve kültürel anlatılar arasındaki gerilimleri ortaya koymaktadır; medya sakallı figürleri yüceltirken temiz traşlı normları teşvik ederek sosyal aidiyette ikircikliliği teşvik etmektedir. Bazı erkekler sakal stillerini ideolojik veya manevi inançlara bağlayarak, yüz kıllarının daha geniş bağlantıları ifade ettiğini öne sürmüşlerdir. Sakallar, cinsiyet beklentileri, kültürel idealler ve medya etkisiyle şekillenen kimliğin dinamik birer yansıması olarak ortaya çıkmakta ve erkeklik bakımının, gelişen erkekliklerin ve öz temsil stratejilerinin bir yansıması olarak daha fazla kültürlerarası araştırmaya ihtiyaç duyulduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelime: Sakal, Cinsiyet, Tematik Analiz, Genç Yetişkinler.

Abstract

This qualitative study addresses the research gap identified by Dixson et al. (2017) and Jach et al. (2023) by exploring the sociocultural significance of beards among young adult men (aged 18-23). Through semi-structured interviews with 32 participants and thematic analysis, it examines whether the rising popularity of facial hair is a fleeting trend or a deeper form of identity construction. Findings reveal multifaceted meanings of beards across gender perspectives. Male participants linked beards to self-confidence, autonomy, and emotional resilience, viewing them as symbols of maturity and independence. Female participants associated beards with masculinity, social status, and attractiveness, often perceiving clean-shaven faces as less assertive or "childlike." The study uncovers tensions between personal grooming choices and cultural narratives, with media glamorizing bearded figures while promoting clean-shaven norms, fostering ambivalence in social belonging. Some men tied beard styles to ideological or spiritual beliefs, suggesting facial hair expresses broader affiliations. Beards emerge as dynamic embodiments of identity shaped by gender expectations, cultural ideals, and media influence, underscoring the need for further cross-cultural research into male grooming as a reflection of evolving masculinities and self-representation strategies.

Keywords: Beard, Gender, Thematic Analysis, Young Adults.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasing trend of beard-growing among young adult men has been observed (Oldstone-Moore, 2015). This trend has emerged across diverse geographies and cultures, gaining widespread traction through social media and celebrity culture. The question of whether beards among young adult men are perceived as a means of self-expression or merely a fashion statement—whether this is solely a moda trend or a vehicle through which individuals articulate their personal identities, social affiliations, or ideological stances—forms the foundation of this study.

The study seeks to determine whether beards represent a moda trend or occupy a more complex position among personal and cultural modes of expression. In this context, it aims to explore in depth the motivations of young adult men for growing beards, the effects of this behavior on their lives and social relationships, and the relationship between beards and gender norms, identity formation, and individual freedoms (Neave & Shields, 2008). To achieve these aims, the study will employ in-depth interviews to elicit the views and experiences of young adult men and women regarding beards.

The rising prevalence of beard-growing among young adult men raises numerous psychological, sociological, and aesthetic questions. Uncovering and understanding the motivations and meanings behind this trend may facilitate a deeper comprehension of contemporary youth culture. Furthermore, factors such as the influence of beard-growing on young adult men's self-confidence, social relationships, and societal perceptions constitute a significant component of this study (Dixson & Brooks, 2013). Consequently, this research aims to demonstrate that beards among young adult men may extend beyond a mere trend, potentially serving as a profound form of personal expression. This study aims to make an original contribution to gender and identity studies by examining the cultural context of the beard trend in a less-studied region, such as eastern Türkiye. The research seeks to address the following questions: 1) Do young men perceive the beard as a fashion statement or as a tool for personal expression? 2) How do women's perceptions of beards influence men's attitudes toward beards? 3) What symbolic meaning does the beard hold in the socio-cultural context of eastern Türkiye? The primary objective of this qualitative study is to thoroughly examine the underlying reasons, personal and social meanings, and the impact of beards on self-expression among young adult men, drawing on the perspectives of both young adult men and women.

1. Gender and Masculinity, Beard

Sex refers to the condition of being male or female, determined by biological factors at birth, while gender goes beyond this biological basis, encompassing the socially and culturally constructed dimensions of being male or female. Behavioral patterns and roles, shaped by biological differences, influence an individual's gender identity. Although gender studies have long focused on femininity, there has been a growing interest in the study of masculinity in recent years (Şen, 2022). Although the terms sex and gender are often used interchangeably in daily life, they represent two distinct concepts. "Sex" refers to a person's biological and genetic characteristics and is determined at birth (Oakley, 1972). The expression of sex involves both behavior and the performer's appearance as male or female (Dozier, 2005). In contrast, "gender" refers to how male and female identities are shaped by socially defined norms, roles, and expectations (Butler, 1990). This study, grounded in Butler's (1990) theory of gender performance, examines how the beard performs masculinity and becomes a symbolic marker through societal norms. The distinction between these concepts has become increasingly significant in social and human sciences. Particularly since the second half of the 20th century, feminist theorists have deeply examined how femininity and masculinity roles are socially constructed, enriching the academic and societal discourse on these terms (Harding, 1987). Gender is shaped across various domains, including family, education, media, religious institutions, and the workplace (Lorber, 1994). From an early age, children begin to receive numerous messages about "girl" and "boy" roles. Preferences for toys, clothing styles, communication patterns, and even emotional responses can be influenced by the norms imposed by gender expectations. Consequently, by the time individuals reach adulthood, gender identity becomes one of the core components of their self-concept, integrated with internalized behavioral rules and expectations (Bem, 1981). The male beard stands out as a highly noticeable and sexually distinct characteristic, often proposed as a potential indicator of attributes like dominance, masculinity, social rank, and self-assurance.

For instance, Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity can be employed to explain how the beard functions as a symbol of power within social hierarchies. But the results showed that beard length was not related to testosterone levels or dominance (Kowal et al., 2021). It is observed that the concepts of sex and gender are distinguished from one another through their biological, social, and cultural dimensions, and this distinction plays a decisive role in the formation of individual identities and the construction of social roles.

2. Personal Expression and Identity

Beard plays a significant role in expressing individuals' personal and social identities. For instance, a specific beard style may emphasize an individual's ideology or affiliation with a particular social group. Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism approach provides a framework for understanding how the beard is used by individuals to present their identities in social interactions and how it is perceived by others. The research titled "Beneath the beard: do facial morphometrics influence the strength of judgments of men's beardedness?" revealed that beards had a notable positive impact on perceptions of masculinity and dominance, with a smaller but still positive effect on attractiveness. The findings demonstrated a significant primary effect, where bearded faces were rated higher in dominance and masculinity compared to clean-shaven ones (Dixson et al., 2017). Researchers suggest that men's facial hair may serve as a signal in both intrasexual competition and intersexual attraction. In the research, women were asked to share their preferences for men's facial hair, while men reported their preferences for facial hair in themselves and other men, as well as their actual facial hair styles. Findings revealed that women's preferences for facial hair were inconsistent, whereas men generally favored facial hair for themselves but were less inclined to prefer it in others. This indicates that men may recognize the signaling role of facial hair, particularly in competitive interactions with other men (Jack & Moron, 2020). Facial hair is among the most visually distinct and sexually differentiated traits of human secondary sexual characteristics (Dixson et al., 2005). However, it remains unclear whether beards serve primarily as an appealing feature to attract women or as a marker of dominance in interactions among men (Kordsmeyer et al., 2018; Puts, 2010). It has been concluded that the beard is perceived as a signal with functions such as competition among men and attractiveness toward women; however, this role may vary depending on the context and individual preferences.

3. Fashion and Popular Culture

The place of the beard in the world of fashion has significantly increased in recent years, particularly through popular culture and media. According to fashion theory, the use of the beard as a style element responds to individuals' quest for originality and distinctiveness (Crane, 2000). Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital can be utilized to explain how the beard enhances individuals' social status and cultural identities. For instance, certain beard styles enable individuals to position themselves as 'fashion icons' through popular culture. However, media and advertisements redefine the image of masculinity through various beard styles, influencing individuals' perceptions and preferences. For instance, the beard choices of

celebrities may be perceived as "fashion icons" at a societal level, directly impacting personal beard preferences (Postrel, 2003). In Fisher's (2018) study, *The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England*, it is argued that beards served as a defining feature of masculinity and frequently symbolized manliness during the Renaissance. Beards also held a prominent place on the Renaissance stage, where the role of fake beards as theatrical props is examined. Furthermore, the presence of facial hair was not only used to indicate sexual distinctions between men and women but also played a role in differentiating men from boys. This distinction suggests that during the Renaissance, boys were perceived as belonging to a separate gender category from men. In developed countries, human mating is often viewed as a process where success in heterosexual mate selection relies on attracting individuals of the opposite sex. Beauty, fashion, and physical fitness hold significant importance, particularly in countries like the United States, where they have evolved into multi-billion-dollar industries. Men and women enjoy considerable freedom in choosing their partners. These circumstances are so prevalent that it becomes tempting to assume that human evolution took place in a context where preferences of the opposite sex were the primary forces shaping phenotypes (Puts, 2010). It is concluded that the beard has assumed various functions in historical and cultural contexts, including as a symbol of masculinity, an element of personal identity, and a fashion statement, while also being reshaped by media and cultural influences on social norms and individual preferences.

3.1. Psychological and Social Dynamics

Recent studies indicate that in human male sexual selection, intrasexual competition has a more significant impact than female choice. Structural equation models and selection analyses demonstrated that physical dominance, rather than sexual attractiveness, was a stronger predictor of mating success. Physical dominance acted as a mediator, linking traits such as upper body size, physical strength, and vocal and facial dominance and attractiveness to mating success. These results highlight the predominance of intrasexual competition over female choice in shaping human male sexual selection (Kordsmeyer et al., 2018). Men possess various traits that primarily function to intimidate rivals. For instance, beards and eyebrow hair growth during puberty in males, are associated with testosterone levels, and can enhance the perceived size of the jaw and brows, signaling dominance (Guthrie, 1970; Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996; Neave & Shields, 2008). In their study, Neave and Shields (2008) found that men with full beards were perceived as the most masculine, aggressive, socially mature, and older. Men with light beards were considered the most dominant. Additionally, men with light stubble were

rated as the most attractive and preferred for both short-term and long-term relationships. In human sexual selection, physical dominance has been found to be more influential than sexual attractiveness, and features such as beards enhance perceptions of dominance by serving as signals intended to deter rivals. These findings support how the beard, within Butler's (1990) framework of gender performativity, functions as a symbolic marker that reinforces competition among men.

3.2. Cultural and Historical Perspectives

The beard has been a physical feature with various meanings across different cultures and historical periods. Prominent secondary sexual characteristics, including vividly colored "sexual skin," hair capes, beards, and other facial features, are commonly observed in adult males of numerous anthropoid primate species (Dixson et al., 2005). Male characteristics appear to be more adapted for contest competition than for other forms of sexual selection. Attributes such as body size, muscularity, strength, aggression, and the ability to create and use weapons likely enabled ancestral males to prevail in direct competitions. Additionally, traits like deep voices and facial hair are more effective in conveying dominance than in enhancing attractiveness (Puts, 2010). In ancient Greece, the beard was regarded as a symbol of wisdom and masculine virtue, whereas in medieval Europe, it was considered a sign of chivalry and honor. In Islam, growing a beard is viewed as a sunnah, and it is considered an adornment for men (Dölek, 2012). Some researchers argue that, unlike the traditional religious understanding, the beard is now more of a personal preference rather than a religious obligation (Baysa, 2017). Today, the meaning of the beard among young adults is being reshaped by personal preferences and fashion trends. In this context, the beard stands out not only as an aesthetic choice but also as a means of expressing one's social identity. In this context, the beard, within the framework of Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism theory, demonstrates how individuals present their social identities through cultural and historical norms. The cultural codes and historical processes of societies are among the key dynamics that influence how individuals perceive and wear beards.

4. Theoretical Framework: Gender Performativity and Symbolic Interactionism

This study adopts a theoretical framework that integrates Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity and Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism approach to understand the individual and societal meanings of the beard. Gender performance explains how the beard constructs masculinity and gains meaning through societal norms. Symbolic interactionism, on

the other hand, enables an understanding of how the beard functions as a symbolic marker in social interactions and how individuals present their identities. This framework provides a robust foundation for analyzing the beard's impact on both individual identity and societal perceptions.

Given the limited exploration of how beards function as evolving symbols of masculinity shaped by sociocultural norms, gender expectations, and dynamics of mate preference in contemporary contexts, a qualitative approach was chosen to examine the personal and societal meanings individuals attribute to facial hair. This method enables a deeper understanding of how young men construct and negotiate their identities through beards, beyond surface-level trends or aesthetic preferences. Such an investigation is crucial for revealing the complex ways gender norms and symbolic expressions are embodied and redefined in everyday life.

METHOD

5.1. Sample

In this study, the selection of the participant group was determined using criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods (Patton, 2015). Within this framework, interviews were conducted with single young adult women and men. Eastern Türkiye was selected as a region where traditional and religious norms shape the perception of the beard. The cultural context of this region, which associates the beard with both religious symbolism (e.g., its recognition as a Sunnah in Islam) and modern identity pursuits, enhances the originality of the study (Baysa, 2017). The study included young adults residing in a province in eastern Türkiye. The ages of the female and male participants ranged from 18 to 23 years (Mdn = 20.66). Of the participants, 21 were women and 11 were men, resulting in a total sample size of 32 individuals. This sample size was determined to ensure data saturation within the qualitative research approach. Dworkin (2024) suggests that, for qualitative studies employing in-depth interviews, a sample of 25-30 participants is generally sufficient to both delineate conceptual categories and achieve saturation. The inclusion of 32 participants in this study aligns with the objective of obtaining sufficient informational richness to understand the personal and social meanings of the beard-growing trend (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The gender distribution of 21 women and 11 men was deliberately chosen to reflect the study's focus on understanding the beard-growing trend not only from the perspective of bearded men but also from that of women who observe and evaluate this trend. The higher number of female participants (n=21) compared to males (n=11) was deliberately chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of women's perceptions

on male identity and beard attitudes. The literature indicates that women's beard preferences play a significant role in shaping men's social and romantic interactions (Dixson & Brooks, 2013; Neave & Shields, 2008). The higher number of female participants stems from the need to thoroughly investigate the influence of beards on gender norms and social perceptions, as the literature indicates that women's perceptions of beards play a significant role in shaping male identity and social relationships (Dixson & Brooks, 2013). This choice is also consistent with the aim of theoretical saturation, as the study seeks to develop a theoretical framework encompassing both men's motivations and women's perceptions of this trend (Charmaz, 2006). Of the participants, 12 were in a romantic relationship, while 20 were not. All male participants had beards. The majority of participants had both female and male siblings. The socio-cultural context of the participants, including religious beliefs (predominantly Muslim) and education levels (mostly university students or graduates), was considered as factors that could influence beard perception. The interviews were conducted by the researchers after scheduling appointments with the participants.

5.2.Data Collection Methods

An interview form was used as the data collection instrument in the study. According to Patton (2015), interview questions should aim to gather information about individuals' behaviors, experiences, thoughts, values, emotions, knowledge, emotional experiences, and demographic backgrounds. In line with this perspective, the interview form used in the study was developed by considering Patton's (2015) recommendations. In the initial stage, a literature review was conducted, and the researchers formulated questions that could elicit experiences and thoughts related to the topic of beards. The interview form was then reviewed based on feedback from a practitioner in the field of guidance and psychological counseling and an academic expert in measurement and evaluation. Following these feedbacks, the form was revised, and pilot interviews were conducted with two participants (1 female, 1 male). Questions that were difficult to understand were revised, and the interview form was finalized.

During the interview, participants were first asked about their opinions on beards (e.g., "What is the significance of beards in terms of personal expression or fashion?"). Subsequently, they were asked to elaborate on their personal thoughts regarding the meaning of growing a beard (e.g., "What do you think about the impact of beards in daily life?"). Finally, questions were posed to understand the current situation within a cultural context (e.g., "How do media, popular culture, and advertisements represent men's beards?").

The interview form consisted of open-ended questions, guiding statements, and additional questions aimed at prompting detailed explanations when necessary (e.g., "What exactly do you mean by that?"—such additional questions were used to deepen simple or vague responses). The interview form was structured to reveal participants' views on the subject of beards.

5.3.Procedure

The research data were collected in 2024 after obtaining ethical approval from the relevant institutions. The interviews were conducted by researchers with voluntary young adult participants. Detailed information about the purpose and scope of the study was provided to the participants. The dates and times of the interviews were jointly scheduled by the participants and the researchers. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was carried out by researchers. During the interviews, audio recordings were made, and written consent forms were obtained from the participants. The recordings were transcribed verbatim. During the transcription process, all information that could potentially reveal participants' identities was anonymized, and the anonymized versions were used in the article to protect participant privacy. In the findings section, participant codes are presented along with age information in parentheses.

5.4.Analysis of Data

Qualitative research provides an opportunity to examine existing phenomena in greater depth. The core philosophy of this method is to present the subject under study in a detailed and clear manner. To gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the perception of beards and beard-growing in Türkiye culture, the qualitative research method has been considered appropriate both philosophically and methodologically. As Merriam (2009) emphasizes, understanding participants' social perceptions in qualitative research requires thorough cultural and contextual reading. Individuals' perceptions of beards can significantly influence their personal identities, social relationships, and attitudes toward appearance. Therefore, exploring beard-growing practices and expectations related to beards in Turkish culture is considered significant in offering an in-depth perspective on personal identity and social perceptions.

Thematic analysis (TA) is an effective method for examining broad patterns of meaning and facilitating a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method presents a process in which themes are not mutually exclusive but rather come together to form a coherent narrative aligned with the research questions. In this study, the focus is on

the self-perceptions of male participants regarding beard-growing and the personal interpretations of female participants.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and transferred to an Excel file. The inductive thematic analysis method defined by Braun and Clarke (2022) was employed to identify recurring patterns of meaning within the data set and to analyze these patterns in a detailed and rich manner. Initially, direct responses to the interview questions were analyzed. The coding process was conducted by the first author (holding a doctoral degree in the field of guidance and psychological counseling) and a second author, who is an expert in romantic relationships and social perceptions. The initial coding was structured by focusing on each interview question separately. For example, in response to the question, "What do you think about the impact of beards on daily life?" one participant stated, "A beard symbolizes power and maturity," which was identified as an *in vivo* code for this specific topic.

As the content of the responses was examined, patterns and overlaps were identified, and codes were grouped under broader categories. For instance, responses such as "It emphasizes personality," "It creates a masculine image," "It boosts self-confidence," and "It is a part of identity" were consolidated under the theme *Personal Functions of Beards*. Similarly, responses to questions regarding social perception, such as "It doesn't fit into modern life," "Those with beards are perceived as more traditional," and "Those who don't maintain their beards damage its reputation," were categorized under the theme *Social and Cultural Perceptions*.

The thematic maps obtained were evaluated based on Patton's (2015) criteria of internal homogeneity (coherence within themes) and external heterogeneity (clear distinction between themes). The coherence of codes within each theme and the clarity of boundaries between themes were examined. In line with these criteria, each coded excerpt was reviewed, and its alignment with the corresponding theme was assessed. Problematic codes and themes were discussed with the second author, resulting in well-defined thematic descriptions. During this process, problematic themes and relevant excerpts were addressed, the clarity of thematic descriptions was enhanced, and adjustments were made by considering the connections between themes.

As a result of the initial analysis, 159 codes and five main themes were identified. These themes were re-evaluated by considering similarities and repetitions among the codes and themes. Throughout the analysis process, analytic memos (Charmaz, 2014) were written to document reflections on the meaning of the codes, their relationship with the themes, and how they formed

a cohesive whole. Following the final review of the data set and the themes, the most notable, detailed, and compelling participant statements were selected to form the core of the article. The analysis was concluded by linking the thematic analysis results to the research questions and the existing literature.

5.5. Validity of the Study

Due to the inherent nature of thematic analysis, different researchers may not evaluate the same data set from the same perspective. However, peer review is a critical step in enhancing the rigor of qualitative data analysis (Morse, 2015). In light of this, and to ensure the consistency of the identified codes and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1994), the data set obtained from 32 participants was provided to an expert (Coder 3) who holds a doctoral degree in the field of Psychological Counseling and Guidance and has completed a course on "Qualitative Data Analysis with Nvivo." This expert reviewed the codes and their corresponding contents as determined by the authors and evaluated whether alternative themes could be proposed. Cohen's kappa coefficient was used to assess inter-coder reliability and the consistency of the analysis. The results were as follows: the kappa value for Coder 1 was 0.95, for Coder 2 was 0.82, for Coder 1 and Coder 3 was 0.87, and for Coder 2 and Coder 3 was 0.78. According to Landis and Koch (1977), kappa values of 0.70 or above indicate a high level of reliability. In this context, it can be concluded that the reliability of the codes and themes is high.

FINDINGS

In this study, data were analyzed following the thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the initial phase, raw data were reviewed and coded. Subsequently, similar codes were grouped to form themes. After re-examining the data set, naming the themes, and linking them to the literature, five themes were identified. Each theme was interpreted within the social and cultural context and connected to the relevant literature (Dixson & Brooks, 2013; Dixson & Vasey, 2012; Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996).

The identified themes are as follows:

1. Beard as a Man's Makeup
2. Well-Groomed Beards Enhance Attractiveness
3. Beards and Social Perceptions
4. Beards and Personal Experiences
5. Evolving Perceptions

Table 1 summarizes the themes presented below and their relationship to the research questions. This visualization illustrates how the themes address the questions of whether the beard is perceived as a fashion statement or a tool for personal expression and how women's perceptions influence men's attitudes.

Table 1. Summary of themes and their relation to research questions

Theme	Description	Example Quote	Related Research Question
Beard as a Man's Makeup	Beards as a symbol of masculinity and attractiveness	"A beard is a man's makeup" (F-11)	Is beard a fashion or expression?
Well-Groomed Beards Enhance Attractiveness	Importance of grooming for social and personal appeal	"Beard grooming adds to our attractiveness" (M-21)	How do women's perceptions influence men's attitudes?
Beards and Social Perceptions	Media and cultural influences on beard perceptions	"The media portrays bearded men as charismatic" (F-8)	Is beard a fashion or expression?
Beards and Personal Experiences	Beards' role in identity and social approval	"I am perceived differently without a beard" (M-7)	How do women's perceptions influence men's attitudes?
Evolving Perceptions	Changing perceptions of beards over time	"Now a beard seems more meaningful as a style" (F-19)	Is beard a fashion or expression?

6.1. Beard as a Man's Makeup

This theme examines how the beard is perceived as a symbol that complements men's appearance and how it relates to the research question, 'Is the beard a fashion statement or a tool for personal expression?' The literature indicates that the beard enhances perceptions of masculinity and attractiveness (Dixson & Brooks, 2013). A significant portion of the participants described the beard as an element that distinctly changes and "*completes*" a man's appearance. Female participants, in particular, stated that a beard gives men a more mature and attractive look, describing it as "*a man's makeup*." Similarly, the literature suggests that beards may enhance perceptions of masculinity, attractiveness, and maturity by altering facial structure (Dixson & Brooks, 2013).

F-11 (female, 20): *"A beard is a man's makeup; it suits some men very well."*

F-14 (female, 21): *"A beardless face looks more childlike."*

These statements indicate that the beard offers not only a physical appearance enhancement but also serves as a socially recognized symbol of masculinity. On the other hand, male participants viewed the beard as a reflection of personal style and identity:

M-4 (male, 22): *"My beard is part of my style; it's a way of expressing myself."*

M-5 (male, 22): *"Growing a beard makes me feel freer."*

These two perspectives position the beard as both a social symbol (female participants: attractiveness/masculinity) and an individual symbol (male participants: freedom/expression). This finding aligns with previous research that highlights how the social and psychological functions of beards are shaped by differing gender perceptions (Dixson & Vasey, 2012).

6.2. Well-Groomed Beards Enhance Attractiveness

This theme addresses the impact of beard grooming on attractiveness and social status and its relationship to the question of how women's perceptions influence men's attitudes. The literature supports that regular beard grooming enhances physical attractiveness (Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996). Both female and male participants agreed that a well-groomed beard enhances attractiveness and contributes positively to one's appearance. Similarly, the literature indicates that regular grooming and styling of the beard significantly contribute to the perception of male physical attractiveness (Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996).

F-20 (female, 20): *"I prefer men with beards, but the beard must be well-groomed."*

F-17 (female, 19): *"An unkempt beard negatively affects one's appearance."*

These statements suggest that female participants' positive attitudes toward beards are conditional upon the criterion of "grooming." For male participants, a well-groomed beard is associated with both self-confidence and social prestige:

M-21 (male, 21): *"Beard grooming adds to our attractiveness."*

M-9 (male, 22): *"A well-groomed beard even makes a difference in the workplace."*

These findings suggest that the beard is not solely a marker of "masculinity" but is also perceived as an element of social status and self-presentation. For example, the statement regarding the enhancement of a professional image by a well-groomed beard in the workplace aligns with qualitative research findings on appearance perceptions in professional settings (Dixson & Brooks, 2013).

6.3. Beards and Social Perceptions

This theme examines how media and popular culture shape beard perception and its relationship to the question of whether the beard is a fashion statement or a tool for expression. The literature indicates that popular culture rapidly transforms male appearance trends (Janif et al., 2014). Participant statements clearly reveal the role of media and popular culture in shaping perceptions of beards. Elements such as advertisements, movies, and television series were highlighted, particularly by younger participants, as portraying bearded men as symbols of strength, charisma, and masculinity (Dixson & Brooks, 2013).

F-8 (female, 20): *“The media portrays bearded men as more masculine and charismatic.”*

On the other hand, some participants noted that clean-shaven male stereotypes are also promoted through media:

M-1 (male, 21): *“Thanks to celebrities, I feel more comfortable growing my beard.”*

M-9 (male, 22): *“The media promotes being clean-shaven.”*

These differing influences suggest that societal norms and popular culture play a dynamic role in decisions related to growing or not growing a beard. Previous studies have also pointed out that popular culture rapidly transforms male appearance trends, with beards sometimes emerging as a rising fashion trend and at other times becoming a less preferred look (Janif et al., 2014).

6.4. Beards and Personal Experiences

This theme addresses the impact of the beard on individual identity and social approval and its relationship to the question of how women’s perceptions influence men’s attitudes. The literature highlights the interaction between the beard, identity, and body image (Dixson & Vasey, 2012). Participants evaluated beards through their personal life experiences, combining individual and social perspectives. Female participants shared how changes in their partners’ beards affected their perception of appearance:

F-7 (female, 20): *“When my boyfriend shaved his beard for the first time, I didn’t recognize him; he looked very different-like a child without a beard.”*

Male participants, on the other hand, noted that comments from others about their clean-shaven appearance or attempts to grow a long beard influenced their self-perception:

M-7 (male, 20): *“When I shaved my beard, I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror, so I wore a mask. I am perceived differently without a beard, and I perceive myself differently too.”*

M-4 (male, 22): *“I tried growing a long beard, but those around me were very judgmental. A long beard is perceived ideologically.”*

These narratives reveal that the beard plays a significant role in the interaction between individual identity, social approval, and body image (Dixson & Vasey, 2012). For some participants, a beard serves as a confidence booster, while for others, it becomes a factor that triggers negative judgments.

6.5. Evolving Perceptions

This theme examines the temporal changes in beard perception and its relationship to the question of whether the beard is a fashion statement or a tool for personal expression. In particular, media, intergenerational differences, and regional factors in eastern Türkiye play a significant role in this transformation. The literature indicates that the beard has historically carried different meanings and its popularity has varied over time (Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996). For example, social media platforms reveal how men construct masculinity through visual self-representations such as beards and how popular culture shapes this perception (Siibak, 2010). Furthermore, it is noted that the aesthetic presentation of the male body and the beard in digital culture contributes to the redefinition of masculine identity within a neoliberal context (Hakim, 2018). Whether young men use the beard on social media as a tool for personal expression or as an effort to conform to trends is shaped by intergenerational differences and regional cultural norms (Manago, 2013). Over time, the transformation in participants' perceptions of beards reflects the dynamic nature of beards in a sociocultural context. Female participants stated that they used to prefer clean-shaven men but, over time, found beards more appealing in terms of style and attractiveness:

F-19 (female, 21): *“I used to find clean-shaven men more attractive, but now a beard seems more meaningful as a style.”*

In the narratives of male participants, it is notable that the meaning of a beard changes across different stages of life:

M-2 (male, 20): *“I’ve had the same beard since high school; I never even considered shaving it.”*

These findings demonstrate how changes in beard perception are shaped by media influence (e.g., social media platforms), intergenerational differences (e.g., young people’s modern aesthetic preferences), and the traditional norms of eastern Türkiye. For instance, participants

noted that social media has popularized the beard trend and particularly influenced the aesthetic preferences of young women (Siibak, 2010). Social media platforms facilitate the widespread adoption of these trends by enabling men to construct masculine identities through visual symbols such as beards (Hakim, 2018). Additionally, the religious and cultural context of eastern Türkiye has reinforced the perception of the beard as an ideological symbol, with young men observed to associate this symbol with both modern aesthetics and traditional values (Manago, 2013). These findings indicate that the beard is a variable symbol shaped by factors such as fashion trends, age, and social environment. The literature also highlights that beards have carried different layers of meaning throughout history and across various cultures, gaining or losing popularity depending on the period (Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the thematic analysis indicate that beards carry multifaceted meanings, including masculinity, attractiveness, self-expression, and social perception. While women generally view beards as symbols of social attractiveness and maturity, men interpret beards as representations of personal identity and freedom (Dixson & Brooks, 2013; Dixson & Vasey, 2012). These findings align with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, where the beard serves as a means for men to perform their masculine identities through societal norms. Additionally, Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity explains how the beard functions as a symbol of dominance within social hierarchies. The shared emphasis on the enhanced attractiveness of a well-groomed beard reflects that beards function not only as markers of masculinity but also as strategies for "self-presentation" (Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996).

The influence of media and popular culture on beards can play a guiding role in men's appearance preferences (Janif et al., 2014). Moreover, the changing perceptions expressed by participants through their personal experiences clearly demonstrate that the beard is a dynamic symbol, with individual preferences being shaped by societal feedback. This dynamic is particularly noteworthy in the context of eastern Türkiye's youth culture, where the beard serves as a bridge between traditional norms and modern aesthetic pursuits (Arnett, 2000).

This study reveals the impacts of the beard trend on the male grooming industry and societal gender norms. For instance, the demand for well-groomed beards has expanded the market for male grooming products (e.g., beard oils, razors). Furthermore, the association of the beard with masculinity and attractiveness may contribute to the reshaping of societal gender norms,

particularly by influencing how young men aesthetically express themselves on social media platforms (Hakim, 2018). These platforms encourage men to construct masculine identities through visual self-representations, thereby driving the popularization of grooming trends (Siibak, 2010). These findings present opportunities for the advertising and fashion industries to develop new strategies targeting male aesthetics. These findings can provide guidance for future research on the perceptions and functions of beards in various social contexts (e.g., different cultures, industries, or age groups). Topics such as the perception of beards in professional settings, their reflections in different occupational groups, and the influence of digital media on beard trends offer significant research questions for further investigation.

7.1. Beard as a Man's Makeup

This study reveals how beards shape men's identity and perception on both social and individual levels. While the majority of female participants perceived beards as a "makeup" that complements a man's appearance and adds maturity and attractiveness, male participants viewed beards as expressions of their personal style and identity. The female perspective highlights the beard as a marker of masculinity and socially accepted aesthetics, whereas the male perspective emphasizes it as a means of personal freedom and self-expression. These two distinct approaches indicate that the beard functions both as a symbol embedded in social norms and as a reflection of personal preferences. This is consistent with Butler's (1990) theory; the beard is one of the ways individuals perform their gender identity. Additionally, consistent with previous research in the literature, it was found that the social and psychological functions of beards are shaped by gender-based perceptions (Dixson & Brooks, 2013; Dixson & Vasey, 2012). In the context of modernization, the beard has become a significant element reflecting an individual's social class, sexual orientation, intellectual tendencies, and educational style (Doğan, 2016). It is noted that in contemporary England, men's access to personal care and image enhancement products has significantly increased compared to previous periods, with a growing preference among men for a wide range of products and services (Gough, Hall, & Seymour-Smith, 2014). Moreover, the beard has been identified as a feature that reinforces social perceptions of dominance and aggression in competition among men (Jach, Moron, & Jonason, 2023). In conclusion, the multifaceted role of beards in shaping men's appearance and identity should be evaluated in light of both societal expectations and individual needs for self-expression.

7.2. Well-Groomed Beards Enhance Attractiveness

The findings demonstrate a common perception among both female and male participants that a well-maintained beard enhances male attractiveness. Female participants highlighted that beard grooming plays a pivotal role in their preferences toward men, emphasizing that an unkempt beard negatively affects a man's overall appearance. Male participants, on the other hand, linked a well-groomed beard to self-confidence and social prestige, asserting that it strengthens both personal image and professional presence in the workplace. Existing literature also supports the notion that regular beard care and grooming contribute significantly to perceptions of male physical attractiveness (Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996; Dixon & Brooks, 2013). Participants expressed a preference for having more facial hair than other men, associating this preference with beliefs regarding female perceptions of attractiveness (Jach, Moron, & Jonason, 2023). Furthermore, beard trimming and shaping were perceived as behaviors reflecting self-confidence and bodily control (Doğan, 2016). While the beard is regarded as a natural component of the male body, it has been historically associated with masculinity, strength, fertility, intellectual capacity, and health. However, it has also been viewed, at times, as a marker of vanity and physical or moral frailty (Withey, 2021). These findings suggest that the beard serves not only as a symbol of masculinity but also as a critical element of social status and self-presentation. This aligns with Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity; a well-groomed beard contributes to men's acquisition of prestige within social hierarchies. In particular, the positive impact of a well-maintained beard on enhancing professional image in workplace contexts aligns with qualitative research on the influence of appearance in professional settings. Additionally, a well-groomed beard is recognized as an important factor in men's processes of self-expression and social acceptance, both individually and collectively. In conclusion, the role of a well-maintained beard in enhancing male attractiveness and shaping social perception reflects the intersection of personal preferences and societal norms. This finding underscores the significance of grooming and aesthetic practices in fulfilling the social and psychological functions associated with male appearance.

7.3. Beards and Social Perceptions

This study comprehensively reveals the influence of beards on social perceptions and the role of media in shaping these perceptions. Female participants emphasized that beards strengthen

a man's image due to the media and popular culture portraying bearded men as more masculine and charismatic. On the other hand, it was observed among male participants that clean-shaven male representations are also promoted through media, highlighting the dynamic influence of social norms and popular culture on the decision to grow or not grow a beard. These contrasting media representations create conflicting effects on both social acceptance and individual preferences regarding beards. The rapid transformation of male appearance trends by popular culture leads to the perception of the beard as either a rising fashion element or a less preferred aesthetic feature. This suggests that individuals are influenced by the images presented by media and popular culture when making decisions about whether to grow a beard (Dixson & Brooks, 2013; Janif et al., 2014). Historical shifts in beard fashion have also been noted, with the beard falling out of favor in the 18th century, while during the Victorian era, beards were viewed as a symbol of divine authority, a natural protective feature, and a representation of male strength (Withey, 2021). Furthermore, the influence of media and popular culture on beard perceptions was found to be more pronounced among younger participants, suggesting that media representations may play a significant role in identity formation during adolescence and early adulthood. This is consistent with Arnett's (2000) theory of youth culture; media plays a significant role in the identity formation of young people. The way beards are represented in the media can directly impact individuals' appearance preferences and the level of social acceptance of these preferences. In conclusion, the role of beards in social perceptions and the media's influence in shaping these perceptions can be regarded as a reflection of broader societal and cultural dynamics beyond individual choices. The various representations of male appearance offered by media and popular culture contribute to the perception of the beard as both a symbol of power and charisma and, at times, a less preferred aesthetic element. This duality exerts a significant influence on the social acceptance of beards and individual modes of self-expression.

7.4. Beards and Personal Experiences

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of beards on men's identity, social approval, and body image in the context of individual experiences. Female participants shared how changes in their partners' beards influenced their perception of appearance, highlighting the significant role of beards in romantic and aesthetic evaluations. Specifically, comments that a clean-shaven look made men appear different and more juvenile support the perception that a beard enhances a man's maturity and recognizability. Male participants, in contrast, emphasized the impact of being clean-shaven or growing beards of different lengths on their self-concept

and the feedback they received from their social environment. The internal and external reactions experienced when shaving or attempting to grow a long beard illustrate how critical a beard can be for individual self-confidence and social acceptance. Notably, the ideological connotations and judgmental attitudes faced by men with long beards indicate that a beard is not merely an aesthetic choice but also a medium for conveying social and cultural messages. These findings reveal the multifaceted role of beards in the construction of personal identity and social interactions. For some individuals, a beard serves as a confidence-boosting element, while for others, it may become a negative factor due to societal judgments and perceptions. Similarly, the literature indicates that the social and psychological functions of beards are shaped within the framework of gender perceptions and societal norms (Dixson & Vasey, 2012). In conclusion, the influence of beards on individual experiences is shaped through both personal identity expressions and social interactions. The meanings attributed to beards and their reflections on individuals' life experiences underscore the central role of beards in male appearance and identity. This indicates that beard grooming and choices are not merely aesthetic preferences but also reflections of personal and societal dynamics.

7.5. Evolving Perceptions

This study comprehensively examines the changing perceptions of beards over time and the dynamic role of beards within the sociocultural context. Female participants indicated that, while they previously found clean-shaven men more attractive, over time, beards have become more appealing in terms of style and attractiveness, reflecting the evolution of aesthetic and fashion trends. This highlights how beards are shaped by societal preferences and aesthetic norms. Conversely, male participants' remarks on how beards acquire different meanings throughout life stages underscore the intertwining of beards with personal identity and life experiences. In particular, the preference of some men to maintain a beard for an extended period illustrates the significance of beards as a personal habit and a means of identity expression. These findings reveal that beards are a variable symbol influenced by various factors, including fashion trends, age, social environment, and individual experiences. The literature similarly notes that beards carry multiple layers of meaning throughout history and across different cultures, leading to periods of increased or decreased popularity (Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996). Although beards have been considered a significant element in the history of the male body, they are a relatively new subject in academic historiography. Until the first decade of the 21st century, beards were largely neglected by academic historians and were

typically limited to popular studies on fashion history, famous beard wearers, or unusual beard styles (Withey, 2021).

The multifaceted perception of beards demonstrates how they are influenced by both individual preferences and societal norms. Additionally, it has been observed that changes in the perception of beards have accelerated and diversified under the influence of media and popular culture. The rise or decline of beards as a fashion element is closely related to society's general aesthetic understanding and gender norms. This indicates that beards, beyond being merely a personal choice, reflect broader sociocultural dynamics. For example, in eastern Türkiye, the beard emerges as a point of tension between modernity and tradition, playing a significant role in the identity formation of young men (Arnett, 2000). Consequently, changes in the perception of beards are shaped by the interaction between the sociocultural context, individual experiences, and fashion trends. Beards play a significant role as both an expression of personal identity and an aesthetic feature shaped by societal norms. This dynamic nature underscores the importance of sociological and cultural analyses in comprehensively understanding the impact of beards on male identity and social perception.

This study highlights the multifaceted impact of beards on male identity and social perception. Female participants perceived beards as a form of "makeup" that enhances a man's appearance and attractiveness, while male participants viewed beards as part of their personal style and identity expression. A shared perception emerged that a well-groomed beard enhances not only physical attractiveness but also social prestige and self-confidence. The influence of media and popular culture on beards has created conflicting perceptions by simultaneously reinforcing beards as symbols of masculinity and charisma while promoting the clean-shaven look. Furthermore, it was observed that beards play a significant role in identity construction and social interactions in individual experiences. Over time, changes in the perception of beards have been shaped by fashion trends and sociocultural dynamics. These findings contribute to gender theories and youth culture studies, as the beard reflects the reshaping of gender norms and identity formation in traditional contexts such as eastern Türkiye. Overall, the recognition of beards as a central element in men's appearance and identity reflects how they are shaped by both societal norms and individual preferences.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides significant findings by focusing on young adults in eastern Türkiye, but it has certain limitations. First, the sample being drawn solely from eastern Türkiye may limit the

generalizability of the findings. Second, the narrow age range (18-23) makes it challenging to examine variations in beard perception across different age groups. Additionally, the study includes only heterosexual participants, which may overlook the influence of sexual orientation diversity on beard perception. Future research could explore the global and local dynamics of the beard trend through comparative studies in different geographies (e.g., western Türkiye or Europe). Moreover, investigating the beard's identity and aesthetic roles with broader samples that include diverse age groups and sexual orientations could provide more comprehensive contributions to the field (Manago, 2013).

In conclusion:

The beard carries multifaceted meanings as a symbol of masculinity, attractiveness, and personal expression.

A well-groomed beard is perceived by both women and men as an element that enhances physical attractiveness and social prestige.

Media and popular culture shape beard perception, creating conflicting aesthetic preferences.

In eastern Türkiye, the beard serves as a bridge between traditional norms and modern aesthetic pursuits.

The beard plays a significant role in individual identity formation and societal interactions.

Declarations

Funding: The authors did not receive financial support during the research process.

Data Availability: It can be requested from the relevant author.

Ethical Approval: All procedures carried out in studies involving human participants adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the institutional ethics committee and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration, along with its subsequent amendments or equivalent ethical standards. The study received approval from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee at İnönü University, with Ethics Committee Decision No: 04.04.2024/6-15. Ensuring participant confidentiality was of utmost importance during data collection. No identifying details were gathered, and all data were anonymized. Participants' responses were solely utilized for research purposes and were not disclosed to third parties.

Consent To Participate: Consent was obtained from all participants.

Pre-registration Statement: This research was not pre-registered.

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence: The authors state that no personal or personally identifiable data was provided to the AI during the preparation of this article. The article also notes that ChatGPT, Grok tools were used for sentence editing, language improvement, and translation.

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