

DIGITAL CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DESIRE TO LIVE ABROAD: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the effects of digital content encountered on social media on individuals' perception of reality, their desire to live abroad, and their psychosocial experiences. Digital platforms do not merely reflect everyday life practices; they also reshape users' perceptions and expectations by idealizing certain lifestyles. The research employed a qualitative approach, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 participants who actively use social media. The findings indicate that a considerable proportion of participants perceive the content presented on social media as reliable and close to reality. Moreover, these representations significantly strengthen the desire to live abroad and may trigger feelings of dissatisfaction, comparison, and alienation regarding participants' current living conditions. Within the scope of the study, the effects of digital content are evaluated in terms of their psychosocial implications, and the importance of digital awareness and critical media literacy is discussed. By highlighting the transformative role of social media in shaping individual decisions and life orientations, the study aims to contribute to the communication studies literature.

Keywords: Social Media, Perception of Reality, Desire to Live Abroad, Digital Culture, Psychosocial Effects.

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SOSYAL MEDYADA DİJİTAL İÇERİKLER VE YURT DIŞINDA YAŞAMA İSTEĞİ: NİTEL BİR İNCELEME

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, sosyal medyada karşılaşılan dijital içeriklerin bireylerin gerçeklik algısı, yurt dışında yaşama isteği ve psikososyal deneyimleri üzerindeki etkilerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Dijital platformlar gündelik yaşam pratiklerini yalnızca yansıtmakla kalmamakta, aynı zamanda belirli yaşam biçimlerini idealize ederek kullanıcıların algı ve beklentilerini yeniden şekillendirmektedir. Araştırma nitel yöntemle tasarlanmış ve veri toplama sürecinde sosyal medyayı aktif kullanan 27 katılımcı ile gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmelerden yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular, katılımcıların önemli bir bölümünün sosyal medyada sunulan içerikleri güvenilir ve gerçeğe yakın olarak değerlendirdiğini göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, bu içeriklerin yurt dışında yaşama isteğini belirgin biçimde artırdığı, bireylerin mevcut yaşamlarına yönelik memnuniyetsizlik, karşılaştırma ve yabancılaşma duygularını da tetikleyebildiği görülmektedir. Çalışmada dijital içeriklerin ortaya çıkardığı bu etkiler psikososyal yansımalar bağlamında ele alınmakta, dijital farkındalık ve eleştirel medya okuryazarlığının önemi tartışılmaktadır. Araştırma, sosyal medyanın bireysel kararlar ve yaşam yönelimleri üzerindeki dönüştürücü rolüne dikkat çekerek iletişim çalışmaları literatürüne katkı sunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sosyal Medya, Gerçeklik Algısı, Yurtdışı Yaşam İsteği, Dijital Kültür, Psikososyal Etkiler.

INTRODUCTION

With the penetration of digital communication technologies into daily life, social media platforms play a central role in how individuals perceive the world, position themselves, and develop expectations about their future. Today, social media platforms are not merely spaces for sharing information. They are also considered cultural spaces where norms, lifestyles, and ideal life narratives are produced and circulated. These platforms transform how individuals perceive reality and provide a powerful frame of reference for making sense of everyday experiences (Stone & Wang, 2019: 774-793).

The literature highlights the nature of social media, particularly its selective representation and idealization. Content shared in digital environments often highlights aestheticized aspects of life focused on success and happiness, largely relegating difficulties, uncertainties, and everyday ordinariness to the background (Festinger, 1954: 117-140; Neff, 2011: 1-12). This leads users to compare their own lives with digital representations, intensifying social comparison processes. Social comparison theory suggests that individuals' tendency to evaluate themselves through others becomes more visible and persistent, especially in digital environments.

The idealized nature of social media content can distort individuals' perceptions of reality. Reality is no longer merely a directly experienced phenomenon; it is reconstructed through representations presented via screens. In this context, social media creates an alternative reality for individuals, and this realm can sometimes become more convincing than physical life. When digital awareness and critical evaluation skills

are not developed, these representations can be internalized without question (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Brown & Ryan, 2003: 822-848).

Recent studies have shown that social media influences not only individual emotions and subjective well-being but also life orientations and plans. The intense circulation of themes such as living, working, and studying abroad on social media strengthens the cultural and emotional dimensions of this desire. The portrayal of living abroad in the digital environment is presented within an ideal life narrative, associated with values such as freedom, prosperity, individual satisfaction, and social acceptance. This narrative encourages individuals to question their current living conditions and develop the idea that a better life is possible in another geographical location.

In the literature, this process has not been explained solely by a rational desire to migrate or economic expectations. Research has also shown that this is a psychosocial trend. These digital experiences abroad, shared on social media, create an experiential space that is not physically lived but still has powerful emotional and mental effects. These experiences can foster feelings of hope and motivation in individuals. On the other hand, feelings of inadequacy, a sense of being left behind, questioning of belonging, and dissatisfaction with one's place can also lead to emotional consequences (Hazar, 2011: 151-173; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010: 614-621).

This study aims to qualitatively examine the effects of social media content on individuals' perception of reality, its relationship with the desire to live abroad, and the psychosocial implications of this process. Through in-depth interviews, the study reveals how individuals interpret social media, the extent to which they trust this content, and the role of digital representations in their life expectations. By highlighting the transformative power of social media on individual decisions and life orientations, the study aims to emphasize the importance of digital awareness and critical media literacy.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

In Türkiye, social media has become more than just a platform for communication and entertainment in recent years. It has also transformed into a way for individuals to evaluate daily life, form expectations for the future, and make sense of social reality. In particular, the presentation of social media content through news, experiences, and life practices has become one of the key factors shaping users' perception of reality. Research conducted in Türkiye shows that social media users' trust in content is often based more on the frequency of sharing, the everyday nature of the narrative, and familiarity with the source than on fact-checking (Çömlekçi, 2019: 55-77; Salman, 2023: 148-168; Cengiz & Patan, 2021: 235-259).

This method of constructing reality perception on social media becomes more visible when considered alongside Türkiye-based studies examining exposure to misinformation and verification behaviors. These studies reveal that a significant portion of users accept content without questioning it, verification practices remain limited, and emotional validation becomes dominant over cognitive validation (Uyar & Hasdemir, 2023: 67-80; Aimeur et al., 2023). These findings indicate that reality on social media is constructed not only through the accuracy of information but also through the credibility it evokes in users.

Another prominent theme in social media literature is social comparison processes. Studies in Türkiye, particularly those focusing on Instagram, show an increased tendency among users to compare themselves to others, and that this process has significant effects on self-perception, psychological vulnerability, and life satisfaction (Büyükkumcu & Ceyhan, 2020: 273-302). Social comparison in digital environments is not limited to individual success or appearance. It constantly regenerates the question of how one should live their life.

Recent studies have shown that social comparison can be associated with everyday stress, dissatisfaction, and feelings of burnout (Aliusta et al., 2019: 10-13). This is not limited to the impact of life representations circulating on social media on individual emotions; it is also thought to affect life orientations and expectations. In this context, social media functions as a comparative space where individuals evaluate their current lives and discuss alternative life possibilities.

Research and youth reports on the desire to live abroad in Türkiye show that this desire has increased significantly, especially in recent years (Lüküslü & Uzun, 2024: 4-48). These studies mostly address the migration trend through economic, political, and future concerns. However, social media makes foreign countries visible not only as destinations but also as representations of a certain quality of life and daily routine.

At this point, Türkiye-based studies on the relationship between social media and migration are increasingly important. Research highlighting the role of digital networks in accelerating and facilitating migration decisions reveals that social media is not only an encouraging showcase but also offers information, experience, and network support (Korkmaz & Tümtaş, 2025: 421-446). Furthermore, netnographic studies show that migrant experiences are normalized through social media and that these shares make the idea of living abroad more accessible (Yüksel et al., 2020: 66-85).

When evaluated alongside this literature, it is evident that discussions of digital awareness and media literacy are insufficient when limited solely to verification skills. While studies conducted in Türkiye emphasize the importance of verification and information literacy, they often relegate the emotional impact of digital content to a secondary position (Yiğiter & Ata, 2022: 1-19). However, the effects of social media content are directly related to users' emotional world and comparison processes. This study offers a conceptual framework that addresses social media, perceptions of reality, the desire to live abroad, and their emotional and psychosocial dimensions.

Method

Research Design

This study is a qualitative research study aimed at understanding the effects of digital content encountered on social media on individuals' perceptions of reality, their desire to live abroad, and their psychosocial experiences. Qualitative research aims to examine individuals' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes within their own contexts. In this respect, it offers an effective approach in examining complex and multifaceted social phenomena (Creswell, 2013: 1-3; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018: 1-26).

An interpretive approach was adopted in the research. How individuals interpret social media content and the emotional and cognitive meanings they attribute to this content were examined through in-depth interviews. Since social media experiences are often shaped indirectly, contextually, and subjectively, a qualitative research design was considered the most suitable method for achieving the research objective.

Working Group and Sampling Process

In this study, the sampling process accounted for participants' frequency of social media use, particularly their exposure to content related to life abroad, and the level of interaction they had with this content. The data saturation principle was used when determining the number of participants. The data collection process was terminated when similar themes began to recur as the interviews progressed (Guest et al., 2006: 59-82).

Table 1.
Gender Distribution of Participants

Gender	n	%
Male	17	63.0
Female	10	37.0
Total	27	100

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured in-depth interview form was used as a data collection tool in the research. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their own experiences and perceptions in detail while enabling them to proceed within the framework of specific themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interview questions were prepared based on the literature on social media, perception of reality, social comparison, and the psychosocial effects of digital experiences. The questions aimed to reveal participants' levels of trust in social media content, the impact of this content on their perceptions of reality, the factors shaping their desire to live abroad, and the effects of digital experiences on their emotional states.

Data Collection Process

Data collection was carried out after obtaining ethical committee approval. Interviews were conducted at times convenient for the participants and in environments where they felt comfortable. Prior to the interview, participants were informed about the purpose, scope, and process of the research, and voluntary participation was the basis of the study.

Interviews were recorded with participants' explicit consent and transcribed verbatim after each interview. Directive language was avoided during data collection to preserve the natural flow of participants' narratives. This approach allowed participants to share

their experiences more candidly and in greater detail (Silverman, 2016).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis in MAXQDA (version 26.0), which was used to organize and code the interview data. Thematic analysis is a flexible analytical method that allows systematic identification and interpretation of meaning patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 77-101).

The analysis process was carried out by following these steps:

- (i) becoming familiar with the interview transcripts,
- (ii) coding meaningful statements,
- (iii) combining the codes to form themes, and
- (iv) interpreting the themes by relating them to the literature and the conceptual framework. This process not only enabled the findings to be described but also interpreted within a theoretical context.

Ethical Principles

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical approval granted by the Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Decision No: 01/82, dated March 21, 2025; Project No: 2025-YÖNP-0146). The ethics committee report was prepared by evaluating the purpose, methodology, data collection process, and issues related to the protection of participant rights. Participants were clearly informed of the study's purpose and scope, and they could withdraw at any time. Participant identities were anonymized, and the data obtained were used solely for scientific purposes and stored in accordance with confidentiality principles.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research was conducted with 27 participants living in Çanakkale, Türkiye, and data were collected through in-depth qualitative interviews. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of Türkiye. Instead, the results should be interpreted as reflecting the experiences and interpretations of the participants included in this study. The qualitative methodology and purposive sampling employed in this research are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon rather than statistical generalization. Future studies with larger, more diverse samples from different regions of Türkiye may contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between social media content and the desire to live abroad.

Findings

In this section, the data obtained from semi-structured in-depth interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis, and the findings are presented under three main themes. These themes reveal how participants interpret their experiences with social media, the extent to which they trust digital content, and how these representations influence their life orientations and psychosocial states. The themes were constructed through repeated

coding of the interview transcripts and the identification of recurring meaning patterns in participants' narratives. The findings are presented with direct quotations from participants to reflect their subjective experiences and interpretations.

Perception of Reality and Trust in Content on Social Media

The interview findings indicate that a considerable proportion of participants perceive the content they encounter on social media as a reflection of real life. Approximately 43% of participants reported having a relatively high level of trust in the content they see, particularly when it is presented through personal experiences or everyday narratives. Participants often associated this sense of credibility with the perceived sincerity and naturalness of the content creators.

For many participants, the authenticity of everyday experiences shared on social media plays a key role in establishing this sense of trust. Narratives that present ordinary daily routines, personal stories, or seemingly spontaneous moments are often interpreted as genuine representations of life.

One participant explained this perception as follows:

"I think people are not sharing artificial things like they used to. They are showing their daily lives. That is why I believe the things I see are real." (KK-3)

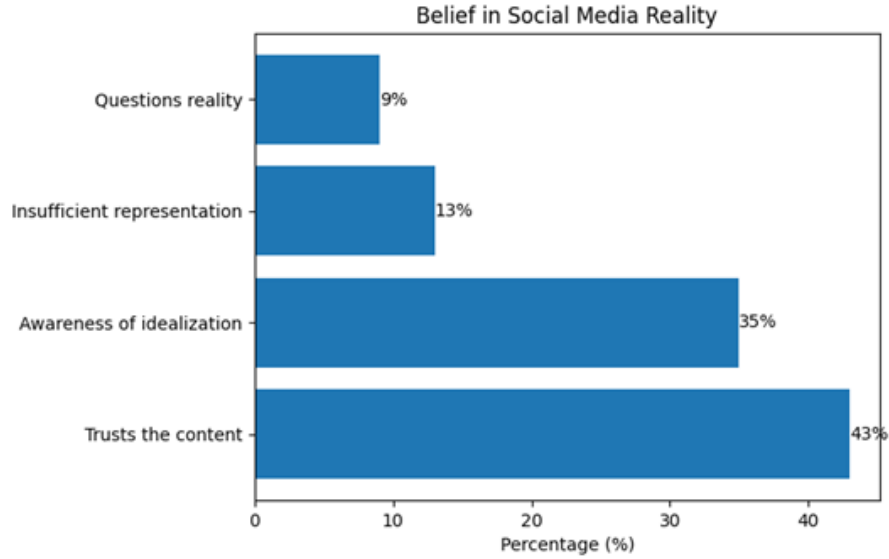
Participants also indicated that repetitive exposure to similar content strengthens the perception that these representations reflect actual life conditions. When similar narratives about living, working, or studying abroad are repeatedly encountered, they tend to be perceived as common rather than exceptional.

However, the findings also reveal that trust in social media content is not unconditional. Some participants acknowledged that the content presented on social media could be selective or idealized. Nevertheless, they also emphasized that this awareness does not fully prevent the emotional impact of the content.

"I know not everything is being shared, but I am still affected, whether I like it or not. Knowing it is not real does not stop the feelings it evokes." (KK-7)

This indicates that social media content may operate simultaneously at two levels: a cognitive level, where users recognize the selective nature of digital representations, and an emotional level, where these representations continue to produce meaningful impressions and emotional reactions.

In this sense, the findings suggest that, for the participants in this study, social media functions not only as a communication environment but also as a symbolic reference point through which they interpret everyday life, compare experiences, and imagine alternative possibilities.



How Digital Content Triggers the Desire to Live Abroad

The research findings demonstrate that digital content encountered on social media plays a significant role in shaping participants' desire to live abroad. Approximately 64% of participants stated that the portrayals of life abroad on social media strengthened their interest in living in another country.

Participants frequently associated life abroad with stability, individual freedom, economic security, and a more balanced lifestyle. Importantly, these associations were not only based on macro-level indicators such as economic opportunities but also on everyday representations of daily life.

Participants emphasized that posts depicting routine practices, such as commuting, spending time in parks, walking in nature, or engaging in leisure activities, reinforce the perception that life abroad offers a more balanced and organized lifestyle.

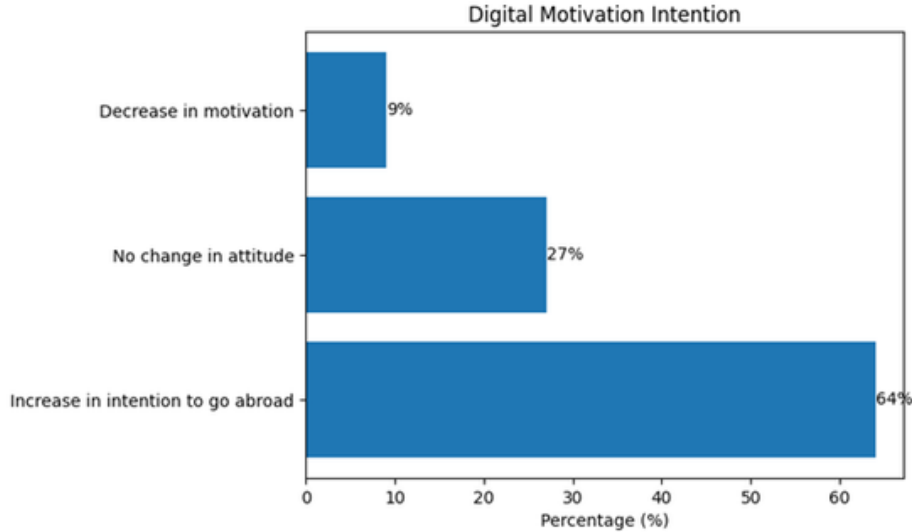
"Even the fact that people go to the park after work, spend time in nature on weekends, impresses me. Life seems more balanced there." (KK-5)

Such everyday representations appear to play a crucial role in shaping participants' perceptions of life abroad. Rather than focusing solely on economic advantages, participants often emphasized emotional and lifestyle factors when describing their attraction to living abroad.

Another factor that strengthens this desire is the process of social comparison. Participants reported that exposure to digital representations of life abroad often prompts them to compare their daily routines and living conditions with those portrayed online.

"I compare it to my own life. There is a constant rush here. When I look at the posts there, I think, 'Why can't I live like that?'" (KK-9)

Through this comparison process, social media appears to function, for the participants in this study, as a space where they evaluate their current living conditions and imagine alternative life possibilities. In this respect, social media not only presents information about living abroad but also constructs a symbolic narrative of a desirable life.



Psychosocial Implications of Digital International Experiences

Participant narratives reveal that representations of life abroad encountered on social media have psychosocial effects. On the one hand, these representations can generate hope, motivation, and a sense of future orientation. On the other hand, they can also lead to feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and emotional distance from one's current social environment.

Some participants described these representations as motivational and inspiring. Observing others' experiences living abroad can encourage individuals to reconsider their plans and set new personal goals.

"Sometimes it feels good. I think I need to work harder. It is like having a goal to live there." (KK-1)

In this sense, social media can function as a source of aspiration by presenting examples of alternative life trajectories.

However, prolonged exposure to such content may also produce negative emotional consequences. Some participants stated that repeated exposure to representations of life abroad led them to feel that they were falling behind or missing opportunities compared to others.

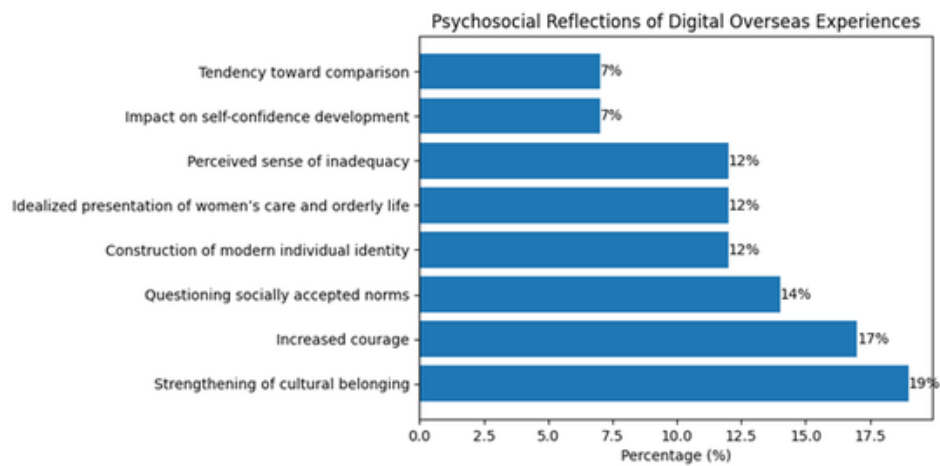
"I feel like I am too late. Others have built lives for themselves, and I am still in the same place." (KK-6)

These feelings are often intensified by the continuous comparisons that occur in digital environments. Participants described how the constant visibility of others' achievements and life transitions may create a perception that their own progress is insufficient.

Furthermore, some participants indicated that these representations influenced their sense of belonging. Exposure to narratives of life abroad sometimes created an emotional distance from their current environment and social context.

"I have started to feel like I do not belong here. What I see on social media is disconnecting me from this place." (KK-11)

These narratives suggest that social media representations do not merely influence practical decisions such as migration intentions but may also shape individuals' emotional orientation toward their current social environment.



General Assessment of the Findings

When the findings are considered collectively, social media appears to function not only as a platform for communication or content consumption but also as a symbolic environment where participants negotiate, interpret, and sometimes redefine their life expectations. Participants' narratives demonstrate that digital content encountered on social media becomes part of the interpretive frameworks through which individuals evaluate their own lives, social positions, and future possibilities. In this sense, social media appears to function as a space where participants encounter alternative life narratives and use these narratives as reference points in making sense of their own life trajectories.

Firstly, the relatively high level of trust in social media content (approximately 43% of participants) indicates the persuasive capacity of digital narratives circulating on these platforms. Importantly, this trust is not established solely through the perceived accuracy of information. Rather, it is shaped by the narrative form of the content itself. Participants frequently cited the everyday, personal nature of the shared experiences as a key factor in making the content appear credible. The emphasis on everyday practices, spontaneous storytelling, and personal experiences contributes to a sense of authenticity, strengthening users' emotional engagement with the content. In this context, trust is not merely a cognitive judgment about whether the information is correct, but also an affective response to the perceived sincerity and relatability of digital narratives.

Secondly, the finding that 64% of participants reported an increased desire to live abroad suggests that social media representations may shape participants' future aspirations. Social media does not merely present geographical mobility. However, the interviews suggest that this desire is not constructed solely through rational considerations such as economic opportunities or career prospects. Instead, participants often emphasized representations of everyday life abroad, such as leisure activities, urban environments, social interactions, and perceived lifestyle balance. These representations create a narrative in which living abroad is associated with emotional well-being, stability, and a sense of personal freedom. Therefore, social media appears not only to present geographical mobility as an opportunity but also to frame it for participants as a desirable lifestyle characterized by order, comfort, and quality of life.

Thirdly, the psychosocial effects identified in the interviews indicate that the influence of social media is neither uniform nor unidirectional. While some participants described social media content as a source of motivation and inspiration, others reported experiencing negative emotions, such as dissatisfaction, inadequacy, or a sense of being left behind. For some individuals, exposure to representations of life abroad sparked aspiration and prompted them to reconsider their future goals. For others, the same representations intensified feelings of comparison and highlighted perceived inequalities between their current life conditions and the lives portrayed on social media. These findings suggest that the emotional effects of social media depend largely on personal circumstances, expectations, and the broader socio-economic context in which individuals evaluate their own life opportunities.

The relationship between the three themes identified in this study is particularly significant. Trust in social media content provides the cognitive and emotional basis for the persuasive power of digital representations. When individuals perceive social media content as authentic or relatable, they are more likely to internalize the narratives embedded within these representations. These narratives then contribute to the formation of life aspirations, including the desire to live abroad. Subsequently, these aspirations interact with individuals' emotional experiences and self-perceptions, shaping how they evaluate their current lives and imagine their future possibilities. In other words, social media appears to serve as a bridge between representations of alternative lifestyles and participants' interpretations of their own life trajectories.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the influence of social media extends beyond simple information exchange. Through repeated exposure to particular types of content, social media appears to contribute to the normalization of certain life narratives and aspirations among participants. Representations of living abroad, for example, may gradually become perceived not merely as exceptional experiences but as attainable and desirable life options. This normalization process plays a significant role in shaping individuals' expectations regarding mobility, lifestyle choices, and personal fulfillment.

Taken together, the findings suggest that, for the participants in this study, social media plays a complex role in shaping how they interpret life opportunities and personal trajectories. Rather than functioning merely as an informational medium, social media operates as a cultural and symbolic space where individuals observe, compare, and reinterpret different models of living. In this environment, users constantly evaluate their own positions relative to the lives they observe online. Consequently, social media is an

important arena in which perceptions of opportunity, belonging, and future orientation are continuously negotiated and reconstructed.

Discussion

The findings of this study largely align with research conducted in Türkiye on perceptions of reality and life orientations shaped through social media use. However, the qualitative data obtained in this research make it more visible how processes that are often examined separately in the literature become intertwined in individuals' everyday experiences. In this context, social media appears to function not only as a platform for information exchange and entertainment but also as an environment for meaning production, where participants interpret, compare, and evaluate their own life conditions. Through repeated exposure to digital narratives about different lifestyles, social media appears to function as a reference framework through which participants make sense of their current circumstances and future possibilities.

Firstly, the findings regarding trust in social media content are consistent with studies examining news credibility and fact-checking behaviors on social media in Türkiye (Çömlekçi, 2019: 55; Salman, 2023: 148-168). These studies emphasize that verification practices among social media users remain limited and that trust in content often emerges through informal cues rather than systematic validation. The findings of the present study support this observation and extend it by showing that trust is frequently established through the narrative style and the everyday nature of the content itself. Participants emphasized that personal experiences, ordinary daily routines, and repeated exposure to similar narratives increase the perceived authenticity of digital content. In this sense, trust in social media does not solely depend on the objective accuracy of information but is also shaped by emotional identification and narrative credibility.

Findings regarding social comparison processes also align with trends observed in Turkish research, particularly in studies focusing on Instagram use (Büyükkumcu & Ceyhan, 2020: 301). Previous research has largely emphasized the relationship between social comparison and self-esteem, psychological well-being, or life satisfaction. However, the findings of this study suggest that social comparison in digital environments may extend beyond these psychological dimensions. Participants frequently evaluate their own life conditions by comparing them with the lifestyles they observe on social media, particularly in relation to life abroad. In this respect, social comparison gains a spatial and existential dimension. Individuals not only compare personal achievements or appearances but also compare broader life opportunities and living conditions. This expands the scope of social comparison discussions within Turkish social media research.

The findings regarding the desire to live abroad are consistent with recent reports demonstrating the growing prevalence of this tendency among young people in Türkiye (Lüküslü & Uzun, 2024). Most existing studies explain this trend through structural factors such as economic uncertainty, political climate, or future expectations. While these factors remain important, social media appears to contribute to this process by shaping participants' imaginations of life abroad. Digital platforms often present everyday representations of living abroad that emphasize a balance between lifestyle and security, and personal freedom. These representations construct a narrative in which migration is

not only an economic strategy but also a pathway to a more fulfilling and meaningful life.

At this point, the findings strongly overlap with Türkiye-based studies examining the relationship between social media and migration. Research on the role of digital networks in facilitating migration decisions indicates that social media can offer informational resources and network connections that may support mobility (Tümtaş & Korkmaz, 2025: 438). However, the findings of this study suggest that the influence of social media goes beyond informational support. Participants frequently described how digital representations of life abroad create an emotional orientation toward mobility. Observing everyday experiences of individuals living abroad makes the idea of migration appear more attainable and socially normalized. In this way, social media not only informs migration aspirations but also contributes to their emotional and symbolic construction.

When evaluated in terms of psychosocial effects, this study's findings suggest that social media may create a sphere of influence among participants. Studies examining the relationship between social media use and life satisfaction in Türkiye indicate that digital platforms may generate both positive and negative psychological outcomes (Demirci, 2019: 15–22; Hoşgör & Güngördü, 2025: 226–235). The findings of this study illustrate how these contrasting effects may coexist within the same experiential context. While some participants described social media content as a source of inspiration, hope, and motivation, others reported feelings of dissatisfaction, inadequacy, and a sense of being left behind. These emotional responses appear to be closely related to individuals' personal expectations and socio-economic conditions.

A particularly noteworthy finding is that emotional impact persists even when participants recognize that social media content may be selectively presented. This observation contributes to ongoing discussions about digital awareness and media literacy. Previous studies in Türkiye have largely conceptualized digital awareness as cognitive verification practices and the ability to identify misinformation (Yiğiter & Ata, 2022: 1–19). However, this study's findings suggest that digital awareness also involves recognizing the emotional influence of digital representations. Even when users are aware that social media content may be idealized, the narratives they encounter may still shape their feelings, aspirations, and perceptions of life opportunities. In this respect, trust in social media content extends beyond factual accuracy and is also influenced by individuals' emotional responses, perceptual frameworks, and levels of digital media literacy (Uyar & Hasdemir, 2023: 67–80).

One of the main contributions of this study to the literature lies in its examination of social media, perception of reality, social comparison, and the desire to live abroad within a single experiential framework. In Turkish literature, these topics are generally addressed as separate areas of inquiry. This research demonstrates that these processes are closely interconnected in individuals' everyday experiences. By bringing these dimensions together, the study provides a more comprehensive perspective on how social media shapes individuals' interpretations of life opportunities and future possibilities.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that, in the Turkish context, social media may function as a social and cultural structure that influences participants' life expectations, plans, and sense of belonging. Rather than merely reflecting social realities,

digital platforms actively shape how individuals imagine alternative lifestyles and evaluate their own positions within society. These findings highlight the importance of moving beyond purely quantitative approaches in social media research and underscore the value of qualitative studies that explore users' everyday experiences and emotional interpretations.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that digital content encountered on social media may influence the participants' perception of reality, their desire to live abroad, and their psychosocial experiences. The findings suggest that, for the participants in this study, social media functions not only as a communication medium that provides information but also as a field of meaning that influences how they evaluate their lives. Participant narratives suggest that digital content can transform the relationship with daily life.

The research results show that trust in social media content is widespread to a certain extent. A significant portion of participants perceive the life practices they see on social media as close to reality. This indicates the persuasive power of digital representations. Social media content appears to influence participants' perceptions of reality and may serve as a reference point for evaluating their daily experiences.

The study's findings reveal that the desire to live abroad is strengthened through social media. Posts about living abroad represent not only a change of location but also the possibility of a better life for the participants. Social media makes this life visible by associating it with values such as order, freedom, and balance. This leads individuals to question their current living conditions and strengthens their search for alternative lifestyles.

The research also shows that digital representations of life abroad create dual effects at the psychosocial level. While these contents offer hope and motivation to some participants, they increase feelings of inadequacy and a sense of being left behind for others. In this respect, social media produces both empowering and challenging effects. The direction of these effects is closely related to individuals' living conditions and levels of digital awareness.

This study demonstrates that digital awareness is not limited to questioning content accuracy. Some participants reported that emotional impact persisted even though they were aware that the content was selectively presented. This reveals that digital awareness also requires recognizing emotional processes and managing comparison cycles.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that social media plays a significant role in individuals' life orientations and psychosocial well-being. Social media reshapes how individuals perceive the world and position themselves. In this context, digital media studies need to give greater consideration to individual experiences and emotional processes. Future research conducted across different age groups and socio-cultural contexts will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of social media.

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EK 1.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Which social media platforms do you actively use and how frequently do you use them?
2. What types of content about life abroad do you usually encounter on social media?
3. How do the posts you see about life abroad influence your perceptions of living in another country?
4. To what extent do you think the lifestyles presented on social media reflect real life in those countries? Why?
5. Do you trust the experiences and narratives about life abroad shared on social media? What factors influence your trust in such content?
6. When you see posts about life abroad on social media, do you compare them with your own daily life? If so, how does this comparison affect you?
7. Has social media influenced your desire or motivation to live abroad? If yes, in what ways?
8. What aspects of life abroad shared on social media attract your attention the most (e.g., lifestyle, work-life balance, social environment)?
9. Do the representations of life abroad on social media create feelings such as motivation, dissatisfaction, or a sense of missing opportunities? How do these feelings affect your thinking about the future?
10. Overall, how would you describe the role of social media in shaping your expectations or aspirations about living abroad?