



## Digital Platforms and Media Use: An Exploratory Research on Trust, Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Turkey<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Media use and news consumption occur throughout digital platforms as a rising trend worldwide. These digital infrastructures serve as channels through which users access content and as gatekeepers that curate the content figured by algorithmic selection. Thus, this research is designed to step inside the digital media use and aims to understand what kind of stereotypes and biases users face in digital platforms. To that end, a group of international university students from Turkey were interviewed about their experiences from several digital platforms. Accordingly, the participants were asked about the preferred source of the news, whether they trust the content they encounter on platforms, the stereotypes they face in their social media use, the most disturbing content in terms of bias and discrimination, if they feel free on their social media accounts, the awareness about the concepts “stereotypes”, “representation”, “algorithmic selection”, “algorithmic bias”. The research has shown that gender is the most common category of stereotype, followed by political, religious, nationality, and social class. In parallel with the concept of intersectionality, it has been observed that other forms of social discrimination are also encountered along with gender on digital platforms.*

**Keywords:** Digital platforms, digital media, algorithms, representation, stereotypes

### 1. Introduction

Digital platforms consist of algorithms that work through the surveillance and data processing collected from users. As a rising trend worldwide, media use and news consumption occur throughout digital platforms. These digital infrastructures serve as channels through which users access content and as gatekeepers that curate the content figured by algorithmic selection. As various multidisciplinary research indicates, algorithms reinforce inequalities and consolidate the existing power relations. Digital platforms are also considered the control mechanisms through which limitless content flows constantly. Considering

<sup>1</sup> The findings of this study were presented at 5th International Congress CONGENERE: Culturas globales, comunicación y género, held on October 3-5, 2023.

digital platforms' ubiquitous and symbiotic nature, we can claim that they reflect society's prevailing preferences, norms, and patterns. These mediums are asserted to substantially impact digital users, mirroring, reproducing, and shaping the existent ideological and cultural codes.

From this point forth, the research was designed to comprehend how young adults in Turkey encounter discriminatory and stereotypical representations regarding social inequalities and gender within their digital platform use practices. A group of international students who live in Turkey and enrolled in the Gender and Media elective course at summer school constituted a purposive sample spontaneously. A qualitative study is designed to identify the types of stereotypes and biases users encounter on digital platforms. In this way, this study intends to take a close look at how people use digital media by following these research questions:

**RQ1:** What stereotypes and biases do users face in using digital platforms?

**RQ2:** What do participants think about eliminating the impact of algorithms and digital platforms in terms of bias?

The participants were asked about their awareness of the concepts "stereotypes", "representation", "algorithmic selection", and "algorithmic bias" before enrolling the class, their preferred source of the news, whether they trust the content they encounter on platforms, the stereotypes they run across in their digital platforms use, the most disturbing content in terms of bias and discrimination, if they feel free on using their social platform accounts.

## **2. Literatur Review**

### **2.1. Capitalism, Patriarchy and Media Industry**

The media industry is among the main drivers and accelerators of the global culturalization of economies. The convergence of all facets of daily life, including work and play, the local and the global, self and social identity, is reflected in the convergence of media production and consumption across businesses, channels, genres, and technology (Deuze, 2009). Unlike other existing industries, the media industry has a distinctive feature: producing content with symbolic value (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). The approach adopted for the holistic analysis of media and culture-producing industries in a capitalist society where unequal social power relations are a critique of political economy. This point of view criticises media industry, ideology, and media production with reference to Marx and Engels' German Ideology, published in 1845, on the passage on means of material production in a class society:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 59)

According to the representatives of this school of thought in the media, culture and communication studies field, the discipline analyses a specific historical phase of the gene-

ral development linked to historically distinct modalities of cultural production and reproduction (Garnham, 2006). This approach aims to show how structural asymmetries and dissymmetry in social relations impact all levels of meaning production and consumption (Golding & Murdock, 1992). In a capitalist society, where the cultural sphere and cultural production are based upon commodification (Garnham, 2006), social actors participate in the social process of the production, circulation and appropriation of symbolic forms in three different dimensions:

1. interaction with the material environment - the process designated within Marxist theory as labour
2. interaction with other human actors for the purposes of social coordination;
3. interaction with the self - the identification and maintenance of self-identity through projection (Garnham, 1992, pp. 8–9).

Mosco (2009) draws attention to the central role of communication in hegemony as both “old and new” media are vital to successfully maintaining hegemonic control, essential to resistance, and the construction of counter-hegemonies. Political economy perspectives examine social structures constituted out of the human agency, even as they serve as the very medium of the social constitution and constrain individuals by using economic, political, and cultural power. Hence, social class, gender, race, and other social categories are considered the consequences of this use and the establishment of that make up the major divisions in the social field. The role of mass media is significant in a capitalist society for commodity production, and its functioning is thoroughly integrated within a production process as instrumental to ideology (Mosco, 2009, pp. 134–210). For political economy, to analyse gender and the other social categories, social class is an entry point: “...examining, for example, gender and power, next, those that concentrate on social reproduction, and finally, on the duality of gender and class, or the mutual formation of patriarchy and capitalism” (Mosco, 2009, p. 197).

The concept of patriarchy has different definitions among scholars. Walby defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (1989, p. 214). With her dual systems analysis, patriarchy and capitalism, Walby (1989) states that patriarchy both pre-dates and post-dates capitalism; hence it cannot be considered derivative. According to her analysis, the two primary forms of patriarchy are public and private. The six structures of patriarchy are paid work, housework, the “patriarchal relations of production”, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state (Walby, 1989). However, Eisenstein interprets this system of oppression holistically and coins it as capitalist patriarchy “to emphasise the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring” (1979, p. 5). To build a socialist feminist political analysis, Eisenstein (1979) underlines the interdependence of capitalism and patriarchy by accepting the assertion that patriarchy, as male supremacy, existed before capitalism and continues in postcapitalist societies, and the present relationship must be understood if the structure of oppression is to be changed.

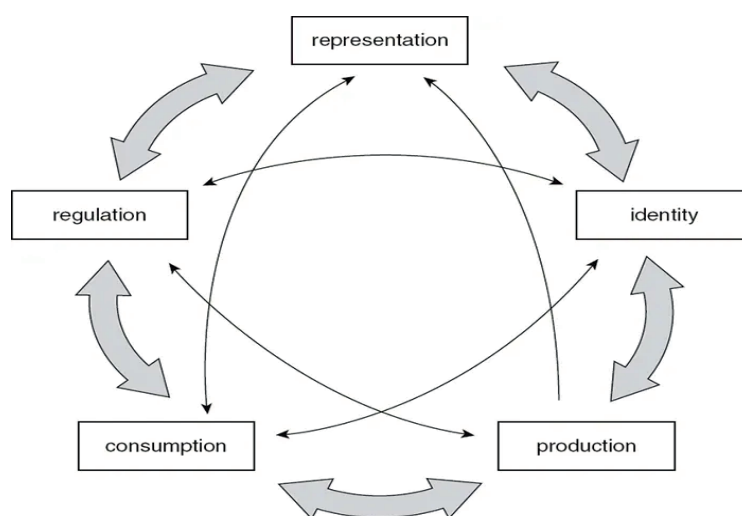
## **2.2. Ideology, Representation and Overlapping Social Inequalities**

Garnham highlights the importance of productive and non-productive labour concerning the private and public sectors and the role of the state in capitalist accumulation,

the role of advertising within late capitalism, to understand the structure of our culture, its production, consumption and reproduction and the part of the mass media (2006, p. 226). Cultural products produced during the working process of mass media in capitalism that contain ideological and cultural codes are essential in meaning creation.

Hall, one of the prominent scholars within the British cultural studies tradition, uses the term ideology to refer to the images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence (2015, p. 104). By highlighting the role of ideologies in articulating different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings, Hall (2015) underlines that ideologies are not the products of individual consciousness or intention; instead, we formulate our intentions within ideology. They work by “constructing for their subjects (individual and collective) positions of identification and knowledge which allow them to ‘utter’ ideological truths as if they were their authentic – authors” (Hall, 2015, pp. 104–105).

Hall (2003) briefly defines representation as the production of meaning through language, which is one of the systems of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning with the culture, which is formed by “shared meanings”. To expand on this, Hall explains the relation of language, representation and culture by composing a circuit of culture: Members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. They must share, the same ‘cultural codes’. In this sense, thinking and feeling are themselves ‘systems of representation’, in which our concepts, images and emotions ‘stand for’ or represent, in our mental life, things which are or may be ‘out there’ in the world. (...) How do languages work? The simple answer is that languages work through representation. They are ‘systems of representation’. (Hall, 2003, p. 4).



**Figure 1:** The circuit of culture (Hall, 2003, p. 1)

Remarking on the role of media images in helping shape our view of the world and

our deepest values, Kellner points out that all the forms and products of media provide materials “out of which we forge our very identities, including our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our conception of class, ethnicity and race, nationality, sexuality; and division of the world into categories of ‘us’ and ‘them.’” (2015, p. 7). The stories supplying the symbols, myths, and resources which constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which the individuals insert themselves into this culture steer the attention of the audience:

Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence and who is not. They dramatise and legitimate the power of the forces that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or be oppressed. (Kellner, 2015, p. 7)

Among the media products mentioned above, news appears as the final output through which the meaning is constructed through the facts. As Tuchman (1978) considers news a constructed reality, to develop an analysis of the social production of the news, Hall et al. (1996) draw attention to the fact that news is not ‘naturally’ newsworthy in themselves; the processes the news go through consist of the bureaucratic organisation of the media producing the news in specific types or categories, the structure of news values ordering the selection and ranking of particular stories, and construction process for the audience, in other words, identification and contextualisation. And finally, the news is the end-product of a complex process, beginning with systematically sorting and selecting events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories (Hall et al., 1996, pp. 424–425). Similarly, Golding and Elliott (1996) draw attention to the two key elements to the world of broadcast news: the invisibility of social process and the invisibility of power in society, which are hidden and unseen.

The prominent television researcher Gerbner coined symbolic annihilation as “Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation” (1972, p. 44). In her article published in 1979, Tuchman (2000) handles the subject with a gender focus and analyses the symbolic annihilation of women with the other related central idea, the reflection hypothesis, which claims the mass media reflect dominant societal values. According to her, the three aspects of the symbolic annihilation notion are either condemnation, trivialisation, or “absence means symbolic annihilation”; in other words, omission (Tuchman, 2000).

Tuchman states that before the advent of the women’s movement, the stereotypes that no one cared about the effect of the mass media upon the generation and maintenance of sex-role stereotypes all seemed natural “given” (2000, p. 152). However, the importance of stereotyping was not lost on the women’s movement because of the nature of stereotypes that are confining; the media’s role started to be questioned (Tuchman, 2000). A long-term study conducted in many countries (1995-2020) found that women still make up only 26% of people heard, read about, or seen in newspaper, television, and radio news, while men make up 74% of news (Macharia, 2020). As well as the lack of representation causes several problems, the misrepresentation also deepens social inequalities. The LGBTQI+ groups, still not accepted in many societies, have problematic representations along with women.

There are several categories of stereotypes, such as gender, race, class, age, ability, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, language education... These interrelated social categories can vary and intersect each other. The term intersectionality refers to the overlapping types of



oppression, coined by Crenshaw (1989) in her analysis of race, sex, or class-privileged and non-privileged women. The term is “The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

### **2.3. Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Bias**

Capitalism in today’s conditions is termed informational capitalism, which is based on a transnational organisational model and organisations crossing national boundaries with a novel aspect that organisations and social networks are increasingly globally distributed, that actors and substructures are located globally and change dynamically, and also that the flows of capital, power, money, commodities, people, and information are processed globally at high-speed (Fuchs, 2011, p. 76). Within these circumstances, the internet is embedded in the antagonisms of capitalist society, and it reflects societal problems in complex ways; it has a dualistic character and online activities are shaped both within and by the antagonisms of contemporary society (Fuchs, 2009).

According to “Digital 2023: Global Overview Report”, 68% of the world population are unique mobile phone users and 59.4% of the world population, 4.76 billion, are active social media users. The digital growth within one year in unique mobile phone possession is 3.2%, and 3% in active social media users. The report shows that while individuals’ daily internet use is gradually increasing, digital platforms occupy an essential place in this usage. Daily time spent using the internet is 6 hours 37 minutes, average daily time spent using social media is 2 hours 31 minutes, average number of social platforms used each month is 7.2, and in Turkey, 73% of the population are social media users (Kemp, 2023).

Digital platforms are defined as “(re-)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetisation, and circulation of data” by Poell et al. (2019, p. 3). According to these prominent researchers in this field, platforms gradually infiltrate and converge with the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organised instead of causing a revolution (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2). Digital platforms contain specific norms and values written into their architectures and are neither neutral nor value-free constructs (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 3).

The assemblage of networked platforms is called a “platform ecosystem” and is governed by a particular set of mechanisms that shape everyday practices. The three main mechanisms as driving forces underlying this ecosystem are datafication, commodification, and selection (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 4). This ecosystem is operated mainly by a handful of big tech companies (van Dijck et al., 2018), whose owners are called new patriarchs of digital capitalism by Little and Winch (2021), to draw attention to their power because of their networks and capital.

The algorithm, the element at the centre of the platforms and their ecosystem, is a sequence of rules that should be performed precisely to carry out a particular task (OECD, 2017). Nowadays, artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms are used in digital platforms based on machine learning and deep learning technologies, causing personalised timelines combined with curated content for each user. Benjamin (2019) attracts our attention to the nature of these digital technologies, which are presented more objectively than the discriminatory

systems of the previous era; however, the character is based on being both reflective and predictive and having a past and future simultaneously. Hence, these technologies reflect and reproduce existing inequalities (Benjamin, 2019). Discrimination is deeply embedded in computer code and, to a greater and greater extent, in AI technologies that we depend on, whether voluntarily or not, in everyday technology use and on the internet (Noble, 2018).

The existing literature on the social impact of AI technologies and digital platforms is extensive and focuses mainly on inequalities such as data colonialism, stereotypes, bias, algorithmic profiling, and discrimination, especially on race and gender (Adams, 2018; Cavazos et al., 2021; Coleman, 2018; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Katz, 2020; Kwet, 2020; Li & Luo, 2020; Mann & Matzner, 2019; Meier et al., 2020). Stressing the nature of the capitalists, Fuchs (2019) underlines that capitalists will try to use automation to advance their profit interests. From this point forth, a dialectical Marxist consideration of automation shows us that “automation is in capitalism embedded into the antagonisms between productive forces/relations or production and necessary labour-time/surplus-labour-time” (Fuchs, 2019, p. 87). Algorithmic automation affects the efficiency of the production process in various industries and information exchange consumption in digital and online markets. In industries like finance, stock markets, health, the Internet of Things, public administration, job searches, government surveillance, self-driving cars, social media, and others, algorithms are aggressively used (Bilić, 2018, pp. 315–316). Such an ecosystem, where algorithms guide every aspect of everyday life, also affects cultural and social codes:

Connected digital devices such as CCTV, drone cameras, Internet of Things sensors, Twitter, Google, Facebook, smartphones, UN Global Pulse technologies, smart city technologies, news feeds, weather report stations, demographic and population data collectors, price and economic data tools, or Walmart’s data collection methods, create constant streams of data. Algorithmic knowledge enables Big Data analytics that are produced by correlating these data streams to identify and analyse patterns of occurrences that enable new understandings and ways of seeing the world (...) Today, algorithms not only calculate existing data but also develop new forms of ‘sensual’ or ‘empirical’ knowledge by finding correlations. Algorithmic knowledge seeks to find patterns and relationships, enabling new ways of seeing, sensing, responding and adapting to life in its complex emergence. (Fuchs & Chandler, 2019, pp. 5–6)

The impact of digital platforms is effectively manifested in news reading and consumption practices. Hermida (2020) counts digital platforms alongside public, paraphernalia, and practices within the four elements of post-publication gatekeeping, news circulation and consumption. Algorithms are agents that determine the news read, the multimedia content accessed, the products purchased by users, and even the people they encounter or interact with on a social level. In the table below, several risk categories caused by the algorithmic selection not only raise social issues but may also negatively impact the digital economic order (OECD, 2017).

## Ceren Saran: Digital Platforms and Media Use: An Exploratory Research on Trust, Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Turkey

Risk	Description	Examples
<b>Abuse of market power</b>	Algorithms programmed to facilitate anti-competitive practices, such as collusion, as well as exclusionary and exploitative abuses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Allegations that search engines manipulate search results in order to disadvantage competitors</li> <li>· Algorithmic co-ordination to fix prices in internet marketplaces</li> </ul>
<b>Bias</b>	Information filters that reduce variety and bias information according to the preferences of online users, leading to “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Search engines that provide online readers with news that match their own beliefs and preferences</li> <li>· Product recommendations for books and movies with similar content to the ones previously acquired</li> <li>· Social networks’ updates about the closest contacts</li> </ul>
<b>Censorship</b>	Restrictions programmed to control or block the content that certain users are able to access.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Content-control software used by companies to block sites with particular religious, political and sexual orientations</li> <li>· Content-control software implemented by governments in certain jurisdictions</li> </ul>
<b>Manipulation</b>	Manipulation of algorithms to select information according to business or political interests, instead of its relevance or quality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Creation of multiple accounts or repetitive transactions in internet marketplaces in order to manipulate feedback scores and influence rating</li> <li>· Design of internet links to bias search engine results in order to rank certain websites higher</li> </ul>
<b>Privacy Rights</b>	Automated systems that collect personal data from users (sometimes shared with third parties), posing concerns for data protection and privacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· “Instant Personalization” model adopted by Facebook in 2010, which allowed service providers to access users’ profiles</li> <li>· Collection of user’s location data in order to better target advertisement</li> </ul>
<b>Property Rights</b>	Use of algorithms to collect, aggregate, display and share information goods protected by Intellectual Property rights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· News aggregator services that redistribute fragments of copyrighted articles</li> <li>· Unlicensed streaming sites for music and video</li> </ul>
<b>Social Discrimination</b>	Automated data-decision processes that, by considering personal information in their formulas, can result in discriminatory outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Pricing algorithms that discriminate based on social and demographic characteristics, such as location</li> <li>· Recidivism algorithms that could result in racial discrimination</li> </ul>

Table 1: Risk categories of algorithmic selection (OECD, 2017, p. 44)

### 3. An Exploratory Research on Trust, Gender Stereotypes and Bias

The researcher taught the Gender and Media course as a visiting lecturer at the 2023 summer school of Istinye University in Istanbul. The course was opened to the entire university as an elective course, and 26 students from 11 departments at various levels were enrolled; one dropped out of the course, and one did not agree to participate in the study.

The fact that students from different age groups from very different backgrounds ex-



pressed their confusion and surprise about the subject of the course in the first session of this course, which they had to choose, pushed the researcher to question this issue. Thinking that this non-homogeneous student group constitutes a good sample, the researcher noticed the students' well-intentioned interest in the field to which they were unfamiliar and designed a study with the students. Aiming to explore the stereotypes, discrimination, and bias that users encounter on their digital platforms use in Turkey, the study is looking for the research questions as follows:

RQ1: What stereotypes and biases do users face in using digital platforms?

RQ2: What do participants think about eliminating the impact of algorithms and digital platforms in terms of bias?

Semi-structured interview, a qualitative data collection technique, involves the researcher asking informants a series of predetermined open-ended questions. Although structured interviews or questionnaires that use closed questions give the researcher more control over the interview's topics, unstructured interviews do not have a set range of acceptable answers (Ayres, 2008, p. 810). Interview is a data collection tool of great flexibility with many different types. As Punch (2014, p. 176) states, different types of interviews have different strengths, weaknesses, and purposes in research, and therefore, the kind of interview selected should be aligned with the strategy, objectives and research questions.

In this research, the interviews were conducted in written format by the researcher, the instructor of the course the participants were enrolled in so that they could feel comfortable and express themselves, taking into account their hierarchical positions. Participants were guaranteed that their answers to questions indicating the demographic structure of the sample would not be used in a way that would jeopardise their anonymity, and their consent was obtained in writing. One student in the group taking the course did not want to participate in the study, but all other students willingly participated in the research. The interviewees were coded as P1-F and P2-M to indicate their biological sex, ensuring their anonymity. They were asked to express themselves freely, stating they would not answer any questions they wanted.

All the questions -except the stereotype categories- were asked to participants in open-ended form with examples in parentheses and italics, as seen in the first and second questions. Models for the other questions were deleted to simplify the text.

1. Do you trust and believe in the news stories you read, watch, or listen to? Do you think the platform, news source, or how you reached them (Google Search, push notification of the application, etc.) change anything in terms of meaning? Why?

2. Which is your preferred news source? (TV, press, radio, website of news outlets, Google Search, Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Podcast, etc.) Please specify the news outlet and explain why.

3. What stereotypes do you see in your social media use? Mark all of them on the table. On which platforms? Explain in detail, discuss, and provide links (if possible) and screenshots.

4. What is the most disturbing post you see on your social media feed regarding bias and discrimination? Explain why? Provide the links (if possible) and screenshots.

5. Did you know the concepts "stereotypes", "representation", "algorithmic selection", and "algorithmic bias" before the course? Which ones?

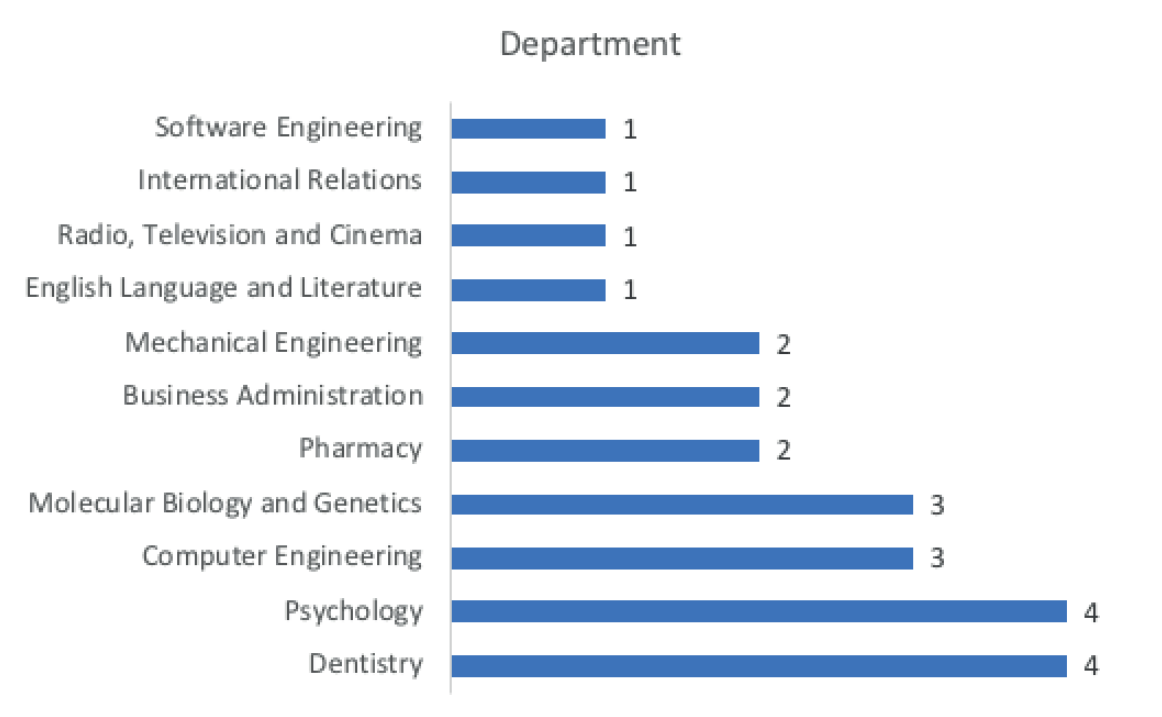
6. Can a user eliminate the impact of algorithms and digital platforms in terms of bias? How?

7. What do you think about how your digital media use and preferences affect your fu-

ture behaviours?

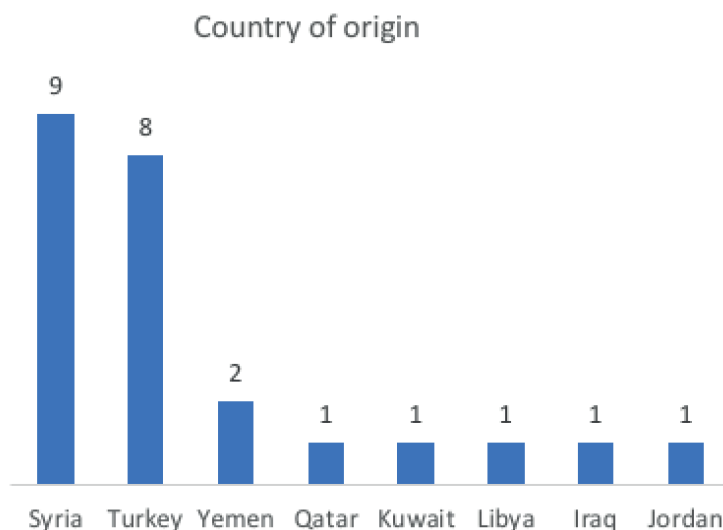
### 3.1. Demographics

The sample group is formed by 24 participants of which 11 are female and 13 are male. The sexual orientations and expressions of participants were not asked; however, one participant made a statement about his sexual orientation and expressed himself as openly gay and supported by his friends and family. As seen in Graphic 1, the participants come from several departments and different disciplines, including social sciences and humanities such as Psychology, Radio, Television and Cinema, English Language and Literature, and International Relations. The majority of the sample group are from health, life and biomedical sciences and engineering departments such as Dentistry, Computer, Software and Mechanical Engineering, Pharmacy, Molecular Biology and Genetics, etc. The group that has to choose this course in summer school is not homogeneous regarding interest and background. This makes them a challenging and diverse group.



**Graphic 1:** The departments of participants

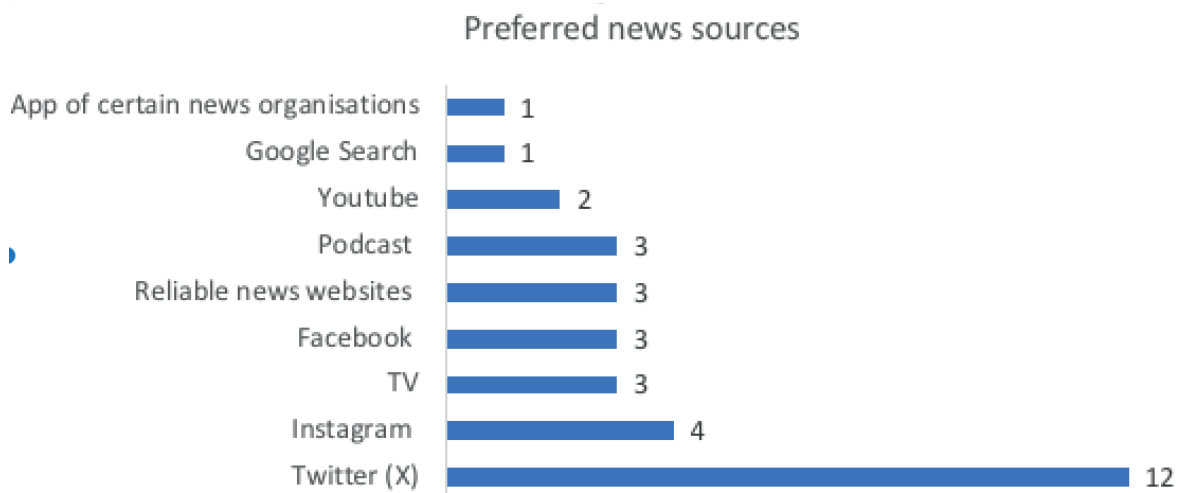
All of the participants live in Istanbul, and their ages are of ages between 20 and 27. Five participants are in 1st grade, six in 2nd grade, eleven in 3rd grade, and five in 4th grade students. Syria and Türkiye are the prominent countries in the sample group. Among their countries of origin are Yemen, Qatar, Kuwait, Libya, Iraq, and Jordan, which can be found in Graphic 2.



**Graphic 2:** Participants' countries of origin

### 3.2. News, Content and Trust

The participants were asked about their preferred news sources in an open-ended format. Half of the sample group answered as Twitter (X). The following answers are Instagram, TV, Facebook, reliable news websites and podcasts. In total, we have social media platforms in 20 answers. All responses are included in Graphic 3.



**Graphic 3:** Participants' responses to preferred news sources question

As seen in Graphic 4, the participants were asked to state the news sources they trust in an open-ended format, and we had 16 answers. Among them, more than half of the participants answered BBC. The second most common response was Qatar-based media outlet Al Jazeera. Following these, there are several media outlets from Turkey, such as news channels NTV and CNN Türk, state-owned channel Turkish Radio and Television

## Ceren Saran: Digital Platforms and Media Use: An Exploratory Research on Trust, Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Turkey

Corporation (TRT), nationalist mainstream TV channel Fox TR, economy and finance TV channel Bloomberg HT, mainstream liberal journal Hürriyet, and independent news outlet Pusholder. Also, among other replies, there are media organisations from Arabic countries like Syria TV, Orient, Al Hadath TV and Al Arabia TV. A participant replied as “leftist newspapers” with no specific outlet name, and one replied to government accounts and politicians.



**Graphic 4:** Participants’ responses to trusted news outlets.

About trusting the news they read or come across on digital platforms, the primary determinant is found to be the source of the news and content. All the participants stated that they did not trust the information and the news they faced through algorithms and preferred to read from the source they chose. While a participant said that she only trusts 80% of the news she sees “Because the media mostly falsifies information and composes news for the sake of views only” (P23-F), a participant underlined that awareness can also be gained by social environment or experiences:

*“It depends on where the source is coming from. If the news comes from a credible source, then yes, that news has my trust. (...) Growing up with bigger brothers and being the youngest in my household, I was taught at a very young age not to believe everything you read on the internet.”* (P10-M)

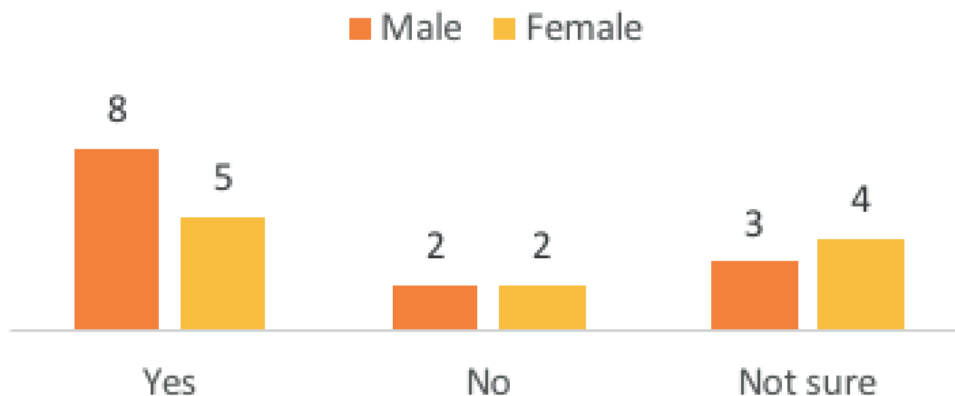
Even though participants do not trust the news they watch and read, they continue to follow it. The main reason to follow the news is social adaptation. Some of the participants stated that they should adapt to the society that they live in: *“Most of them I don’t (trust) but sure I continue to listen and care what is said by news platform. Because I feel that I should be tuned with the society that I live in.”* (P5-M)

One of the significant outcomes of this question was to see the awareness of algorithmic selection of the participants. Before the course, we asked the participants whether they were familiar with the concepts of stereotypes, representation, algorithmic selection, and algorithmic bias and found out that they were aware of the digital platforms’ social impacts. Most participants replied that they knew algorithmic selection and bias but gained a critical point of view and gender gaze after completing the course. A Pharmacy student underlines the importance of being an active user with the example of the independent search engine alternative to Google that lets the user search and browse the web without tracking the searches or browsing history, and personalised content, DuckDuckGo: *“I used to be sceptical about all the news I read, but recently, I changed my approach on social media to seek resources for every topic before believing it. I’ve also noticed that some platforms and search engines promote certain news more than others. So, I’ve started using DuckDuckGo.com as my default search*

engine and observed a significant change in the suggested stories. I see that trust information from certain platforms and news sources more, noting varying credibility levels and biases in reporting.” (P13-M)

### 3.3. Feeling Free on Social Media Platforms

The participants were asked whether they felt free themselves on social media platforms. Thirteen of the participants replied that they felt free. Nevertheless, as one female participant stated, “Feeling free on social media is a mixed experience”, and it is also a relative concept: “There are moments of empowerment when I can confidently express my femininity and connect with a community of women who share similar experiences. Engaging in conversations about womanhood and breaking down stereotypes can be incredibly fulfilling.” (P22-F) As detailed answers could be checked on Graphic 5, answers may differ depending on gender. However, it is not possible to detect a gender-related variation.



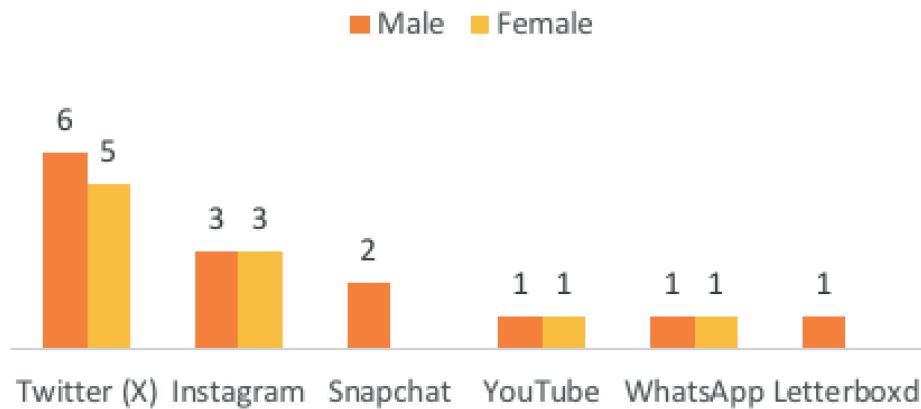
**Graphic 5:** Participants’ responses to “Do you feel free on social media when expressing yourself?”

On the one hand, social media platforms are seen as an emancipatory space where participants find the freedom they cannot find in real life; as a participant specified, “Social media gives me more freedom to choose the way I love self to be more than real life because I will not be afraid for the feedback of people in real life” (P12-M). On the other side, these platforms, where existing limitations and power relations in society are reflected and reproduced, have pushed individuals to act within a demarcated area: “Yes, if you don’t cross the limits.” (P11-M) “I am both a natural and a unique woman who knows where to stop.” (P18-F) “I identify as she/her, a decision based on logical thinking heavily influenced by my religious background. Luckily, because I live in a society that exclusively recognises male and female gender, I feel free to use social media.” (P7-F) “Sometimes I feel free. I usually try to share more carefully because of our social structure. I don’t think we are completely free. I know I will be lynched if I share something against our general structure. Sometimes, I express what I cannot share in daily life on social media.” (P24-F)

Where feeling free ends on using social media is where safety concerns begin. The participant who expresses himself as openly gay within his social circle states that his family warns him to act carefully because of security concerns caused by society: “My family knows and respects that I am gay, but when it comes to social media, they always tell me to post carefully and not to post things that are too obvious for my safety. Actually, I am both comfortable and not comfortable about it. Everything depends on our society. Unfortunately, we have a homophobic and patriarchal socie-



ty, and I cannot express myself freely both in real life and on social media.” (P20-M)

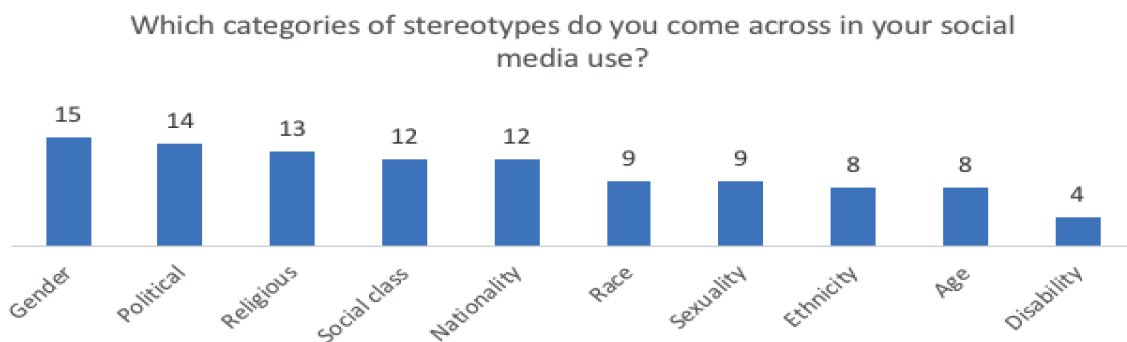


**Graphic 6:** Participants’ responses to “Which social media platform do you feel more free on?”

The social media platforms where participants feel free are shown in Graphic 6. Twitter (X) is the platform where they feel more free for both female and male participants. Whether users feel free while using the digital platform depends on platform usage practices. However, Twitter (X) is the most common answer among both male and female participants. While this is assumed to be since the platform is based on producing text-oriented content, it is also an essential factor that the platform allows users anonymous and semi-anonymous use: “We are subjected to a lot of judgments and criticism. For example, I do not specify gender on Twitter and use it anonymously. Because I do not want to accept the feminine and sexist judgments I have been given.” (P16-F)

### 3.4. Stereotype Categories

Numerous studies and ongoing awareness campaigns have identified various categories for common stereotypes. Within the scope of the research, participants were asked to indicate the stereotypes they encountered while using digital media and platforms. The categories in Graphic 7 were asked to the participants in a structured multiple-choice question format, and it was stated that they could select more than one option. According to the answers to this question, the most common stereotype category is gender, followed by political, religious, social class and nationality.



**Graphic 7:** Participants’ responses to “Which categories of stereotypes do you come across in your social media use?”

## Ceren Saran: Digital Platforms and Media Use: An Exploratory Research on Trust, Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Turkey

Participants were asked to express themselves through examples by finding the social media posts that bothered them the most. They were also invited to discuss how stereotypes create bias and discrimination. To that end, they were asked to reply to the question, “What is the most disturbing, offensive post you see on your social media feed regarding stereotypes, discrimination and bias?” by providing links or screenshots. While not all participants responded to this question, prominent examples were categorised following the collected responses.

### 3.5. Sexual Orientation

A participant gave the example of a Twitter (X) post about Ebrar Karakurt, a National Women Volleyball Team member of Turkey. In Turkey, due to her sexual orientation and identity, Karakurt frequently comes to the fore on social media and is also on the agenda of politicians. On the post, a pro-government account with a former Ottoman sultan named Abdülhamid replied to Karakurt’s tweet, “*As the Muslim Turkish nation, we continue to tolerate you*”. And Karakurt replied, “*Don’t mess around Abdulhamid*”. The participant who gave this example drew attention to the discrimination that prevents even such outstanding achievements: “*Our National Women’s volleyball team beat Belgium 3-1 and reached the quarter-finals. Belgian media also said that Ebrar Karakurt was one of the best volleyball players in the world. It’s a national achievement, but someone tweeted like that. It’s because her sexual orientation has been criticised for being different to that person and on religious grounds, which is quite disturbing.*” (P16-F)



Figure 2: A Twitter (X) post about Ebrar Karakurt, a Turkish national volleyball player

### 3.6. Homophobia

A participant presented the images of a campaign organised by Islamic and conservative organisations and institutions to “raise awareness against LGBT” in Turkey in 2022. As seen below, Figure 5 is an Instagram post of an Islamic radio channel, “Gençliğin Sesi Radyosu”, “Voice of Youth”. Also, Figure 6 is the image used as a billboard campaign poster taken in Istanbul. The participant stated that this campaign and the logic behind it stem from social dynamics: “*Homophobia is an embarrassment to humanity. Injustice and discrimination against persons based on their sexual orientation or gender identity are referenced in this terrible mindset.*” (P20-M)



Figure 3: “Only Islam protects our family”



Figure 4: Billboard in Istanbul, “Only Islam protects your family”

### 3.7. Myths

Years of biased coverage of female drivers by the news media continue today with user-generated content on social media platforms. In the meme provided by one participant, we see a dog that is very calm when a male driver is driving but whose eyes are wide with fear when a female driver is driving. Participant P16-F discussed the myth based on the belief that women are more careless or unsafe when driving. This myth has been set up over the argument alleging “men are naturally skilled car drivers”, which has been constructed with the support of the media using the historical background of society.



Figure 5: The meme showing a dog's facial expression. “If a man drives”, “if a woman drives”.

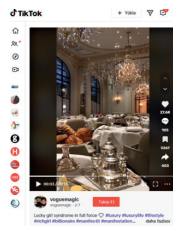
According to P16-F, another “housework is the natural duty of women” myth was implemented with the help of the media industry with lots of images and repetition, “It involves the belief that housework is the natural duty of women, that men are engaged in heavy labour and that they should not interfere in domestic work” (P16-F). Although this issue is still constantly on the agenda with stereotypes on digital platforms, the case is drawn to attention and criticised with forms of representation that oppose the stereotype. The image below criticises this problem with an example the participant found on a social media platform.



Figure 6: An image provided by P16-F, “housework is the natural duty of women” myth.

### 3.8.Social Class

A participant from Libya gave examples of social class and nationality. A TikTok video<sup>2</sup> with the caption “*Lucky girl syndrome in full force #luxury #luxurylife #lifestyle #richgirl #billionaire #manifestit #manifestation #dreamlife #goals #luckygirlsyndrome*”. In the video, we see various details of a luxurious life: luxury spaces consisting of restaurants, hotel rooms, homes and cars, and branded luxury consumer products such as bags and jewellery. Over the video, we hear a young woman’s speech, “*I get everything I want. Because that’s just the way it is. Things are always working out in my favour. I am so lucky. What’s meant for me never misses me.*”



**Figure 7:** Screenshot from the TikTok video.

The video taken from the account named “voguemagic” aims to present sequences of a luxury lifestyle in London and a search for cooperation for PR activities. The participant who gave this example states that reflections of social class can appear in many different ways on social media platforms, frequently reflecting and occasionally aggravating societal disparities. It also draws attention to raising awareness and gaining literacy on facing the impacts of representations:

“Consider the following factors when using social media and your socioeconomic class: *Lifestyle Design, Access and Participation, Online Communities. Moreover, encouraging media literacy and critical thinking might aid users in understanding how class dynamics affect the content they come across. Social media can contribute to a wider discourse about social class and its ramifications by developing equal online environments.*” (P3-F)

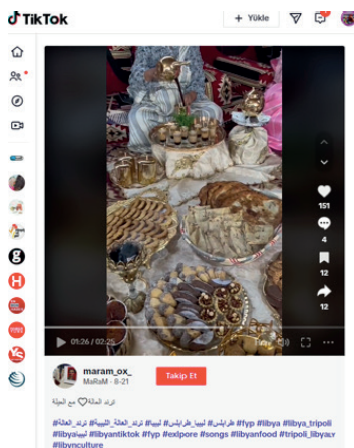
### 3.9.Nationality

In this category, we see a TikTok video<sup>3</sup> from Libya. Its caption in Arabic is “*Family trend with the family #family\_trend #Libyan\_family\_trend #Libya #Libya\_Tripoli #Tripoli*”. The video, with traditional music in the background, depicts the environment inside a tent with ethnic-patterned carpets and items. In the environment where there are baskets, jugs, chests and musical instruments, jewels are brought in baskets decorated with fancy fabrics. Women dressed in traditional fancy clothes and jewellery carry traditional dishes on gilded serving plates. While the person shooting the video does not explicitly capture the women’s faces, the women carrying the food cover their bodies and faces with their clothes. Local dishes are served on golden plates, and glasses are displayed on the floor with lacy and gold embroidered covers. In the rest of the video, we see women sitting around the floor table, having fun by playing musical instruments and clapping their hands. The video ends

2 The video is taken from the TikTok account “voguemagic”. [https://www.tiktok.com/@voguemagic/video/7197517730214432006?\\_r=1&\\_t=8fH1dcRD5bp](https://www.tiktok.com/@voguemagic/video/7197517730214432006?_r=1&_t=8fH1dcRD5bp)

3 The video is taken from the TikTok account maram\_ox [https://www.tiktok.com/@maram\\_ox/video/7269783138929265928?\\_r=1&\\_t=8fH1tJ4ao10](https://www.tiktok.com/@maram_ox/video/7269783138929265928?_r=1&_t=8fH1tJ4ao10)

with fireworks at dusk. It is thought that the video, which does not specify what kind of event it is in the caption, belongs to a traditional celebration ritual such as a wedding, engagement ceremony, etc.



**Figure 8:** Screenshot from the TikTok video.

This video is about a representation of Libyan traditions with a food feast and fancy orientalist figures. While the country where the effects of war and civil conflict continue struggles with poverty, this video, claiming to exhibit Libyan culture, presents us a wealthy and splendid ceremony, not an ordinary sequence of everyday life. In digital platforms, especially on TikTok, Libyan nationality is represented differently, with all the food, clothes, jewellery, and items demonstrating luxury and wealth in a fancy and orientalist way. Contrarily, the participant who gave this example points out that digital platforms offer essential opportunities for intercultural interactions:

“Recognising the range of experiences and viewpoints is necessary to comprehend the influence of nationality on social media. Cross-cultural relationships should be approached with respect and openness while also being mindful of the likelihood of misunderstandings and biases. Social media may be an effective instrument for developing connections and discovering the world’s diverse cultural heritage.” (P3-F)

### **3.10. Ethnocentrism & Xenophobia**

Ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and racism are ever-increasing problems that we frequently encounter in everyday life in Turkey, especially with the growing number of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan in recent years. Xenophobia, which manifests itself through racist and discriminatory discourses frequently encountered on social media platforms, poses a serious problem that threatens the security of refugee groups. This discrimination has become so commonplace that it has settled into daily discourse and spread throughout society: “Recently, on Twitter, I saw this post about harming Syrians for cash prizes in Bitcoin. The post disturbed me greatly, but not as much as the misspelt hate and xenophobia comments. I was surprised how something like this could propagate on platforms like Twitter without being shut down immediately. What’s more offensive than the content itself is the reaction in the comment, where almost everybody was taking it as a joke. I don’t know what is if this isn’t biased, discriminatory, disturbing, and offensive.” (P13-M)





Figure 9: A tweet about a reward system for harming Syrian refugees in Istanbul

Among the examples, a participant draws attention to the stereotypical representations of bias and judgment about the appearance of individuals: “If there is a man who uses a bag, he is gay, and if he has a gun, he is a Muslim and a terrorist. Thoughts such as where you come from or what your profession can be according to the beard’s shape. If he wears glasses, he can be a professor.” (P16-F)

On digital platforms, we do not just encounter user-generated stereotypes; we also experience the stereotypes caused by problematic representations of the media industry. News, images and content created by the media industry are widely circulated through digital platforms and algorithms, further strengthening their impact on the audience. In our case, BBC News, which the participants pointed out as the most reliable news source in the research and which was the answer given by half of them, was given as an example by one participant with its discriminatory and biased news: “Unfortunately, it is not just people who post discriminative content on social media, but even reputable and international media houses post news that are biased towards certain social groups. The Western Media has been accused several times for its unfair reporting on issues affecting the Arab and African countries. For example, in the concluded 2022 Qatar World Cup, BBC was accused of biases.” (P1-F)

### 3.11. Impact of Algorithms and Digital Platforms on Users

We asked the participants’ opinions about the impact of algorithms and digital platforms on individuals. The participants replied to the question, “How can a user eliminate the impact of algorithms and digital platforms in terms of bias?” by remarking that both users and developers can manage the impact of the algorithms. While some participants thought that it could not be possible for a user to eliminate the effects of algorithms, “This is because it is the platform that has been programmed through” (P1-F), most of them think that these effects can be reduced: “Understanding how algorithms work is crucial because algorithms often deliver content based on the user’s past behaviour” (P16-F): “The first step in solving the problems is understanding them. Users can report biased material or conduct on several sites. Users may give input when they run across these problems, which can help platforms improve their algorithms and content control. Encourage a variety of online activities on social media and other channels. Algorithmic bias can be reduced by interacting with many voices and viewpoints.” (P20-M)

We have compiled the highlights of the participants’ answers to these questions and

included them in a list below in Table 2. As can be seen from these answers, the sample of the study is a group that is aware of the use of digital platforms and familiar with the functioning of algorithms. To highlight, a participant underlines the importance of being an active user: *“Make a conscious effort to find knowledge from various sources and viewpoints. By engaging with content from other perspectives, you can avoid the echo chamber effect and become more exposed to various viewpoints. Take a critical stance when interacting with digital content. Consider the potential biases behind the content, analyse the evidence presented, and query the information’s sources.”* (P3-F)

<b>How can a user eliminate the impact of algorithms and digital platforms in terms of bias?</b>	
•	Understanding how algorithms work is the first step in solving the problems.
•	Mitigating the use of platforms that do not suit them.
•	Diversifying sources.
•	Engaging critically.
•	Interacting with many voices and viewpoints.
•	Giving input for content control.
•	Reporting biased material.
•	Reset devices periodically to limit the effects of algorithms.
•	Maintaining education and awareness.
•	Encouraging a variety of online activity on social media and other channels.
•	For platforms, allowing customer management and customisation.

**Table 2:** Ways to reduce the impact of platforms and algorithms.

Discussing the future effects of algorithms and digital platforms on individuals, participants stated that the results are not only negative but also underlined the positive impact. As Fuchs emphasised (2009), the internet has a dualistic character and online activities are influenced by and within the conflicts of modern society; the participants’ responses once again demonstrated the dualistic character of these technologies. We asked participants to reply, *“How do your digital media use and preferences affect your future behaviours?”*. We examined their examples of the positive and negative effects of digital platforms and algorithms. The prominent answers are compiled and presented as a list in Table 3:

*“My knowledge and awareness of many things, from global events to specialised hobbies, are shaped by the web material I consume. This understanding affects my behaviours, decisions, and discussions, such as when I choose to support causes or speak out. I am exposed to diverse viewpoints and beliefs thanks to digital media.”* (P20-M)

*“Content is frequently personalised by algorithms in digital media based on user preferences and behaviour. As a result, people may experience a ‘filter bubble’, where they only encounter information supporting their opinions and interests. This could result in confirmation bias and limit exposure to various points of view.”* (P3-F)

*“Digital media offers us easy access. We have instant access to everything and thus can easily consume information. This can change our habits. For example, instead of accessing information from a historical source or books, we may access it from platforms full of misinformation. Our buying habits may change. We are inside a magical algorithm, and instant campaigns can impress us.”* (P16-F)

*“I think I will be trying to limit my social media intake to the minimum. I defiantly felt it was affecting my interests and perspectives. I feel that negative and sensationalised content raises my anxiety and makes me biased.”* (P13-M)

**Ceren Saran: Digital Platforms and Media Use: An Exploratory Research on Trust, Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Turkey**

Positive Effects	Negative Effects
Raising awareness Providing a diverse range of viewpoints and sources Learning and skill development Developing ideas and concepts Change in habits Direct interaction Can contribute to a civilised society	Personalisation Filter bubble Confirming bias Limiting exposure to various points of view Predetermining the type of content that will appear to the user Offering easy access Consuming information very easily Change in habits Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation Reinforcing existing beliefs

**Table 3:** Impact of digital media use and preferences for the future behaviours

**Conclusion**

In a capitalist patriarchal society, digital platforms and their algorithms are influential actors that reproduce and strengthen existing societal inequalities. On the other hand, they also have the potential to host practices and create platforms to fight against these inequalities. In parallel with Mosco (2009), who underlines the role of mass media in a capitalist society for commodity production and as an instrumental to ideology, it can be specified that digital platforms are tools that work exactly this way. While digital platforms provide users with a timeline shaped by algorithms and generate adequate income from consuming personalised curation, they also enable the dissemination of content created by the dominant ideas in society. These may include news prepared by the media industry and user-generated content addressing rising discrimination and xenophobia in society. Eventually, this function of digital platforms serves to reinforce existing unequal balances of power.

The study primarily searched for answers to “RQ1: What stereotypes and biases do users face in using digital platforms?”. After fieldwork, the research revealed that gender is the most common stereotype category, followed by political, religious, nationality, and social class. Findings showed that stereotype and discrimination categories coexist in digital platforms and reinforce each other, as Crenshaw (1989) suggested with the intersectionality concept. These stereotypes serve for discrimination and bias, empowered with algorithms and digital platforms.

The answers given by the participants are compatible with the thesis of Garnham (1992): in a capitalist society, social actors are involved in social processes within the production, circulation and appropriation of symbolic forms. Accordingly, the three dimensions of the social process, as Garnham (1992) remarks that social actors participate, the interaction with the material environment, the interaction with other human actors for the purposes of social coordination, and the interaction with the self could be considered as where the reflections of all stereotypes, including gender, nationality, social class, etc., implicitly found in the social processes can be visibly seen. With reference to Hall (2003), representation necessitates language and “shared meanings”, and we formulate our intentions within ideology (Hall, 2015). So, we can claim that, including existing inequalities, “shared” meanings and values are represented and reproduced with the help of algorithms via digital platforms.

## Ceren Saran: Digital Platforms and Media Use: An Exploratory Research on Trust, Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Turkey

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Another research question is “RQ2: What do participants think about eliminating the impact of algorithms and digital platforms in terms of bias?”. The participants underlined several ways to manage and reduce the algorithms’ impacts on users, developers and platform executives. Most participants recognise the concepts of algorithmic selection, algorithmic bias and personalisation. They are also aware of the negative impacts of algorithms, and all of the participants state that they only trust the news and content provided by reliable sources. Thus, this awareness provides them with digital literacy and critical engagement consciousness. Most of them highlighted that “Understanding how algorithms work is the first step in solving the problems”. A list was created from their answers about eliminating the impact of algorithms and digital platforms and their positive and negative effects.

Also, the research showed that the positive effects of digital platforms and algorithms should be distinguished and made apparent when evaluating the consequences of digital platforms and algorithms. The participants emphasised how effective the positive impacts of digital platforms and algorithms can be in their own lives and pointed out the importance of being an active user. Especially in Turkey’s case, for an authoritarian, politically and culturally polarised country, the opportunity for polyphony, pluralism and openness to diverse voices brought by digital platforms is crucial. It has strong positive effects on opponent communities. In future research, the dualistic character of the internet and both the negative and positive impacts of digital platforms and media use could be handled with examples within the intersectionality of overlapping social inequalities.

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## **Ceren Saran: Digital Platforms and Media Use: An Exploratory Research on Trust, Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Turkey**

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