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Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sinem Onar

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THE IMAGE AND PERCEPTION OF TURKISH/TÜRKİYE VIA SOCIAL MEDIA: BALKAN STUDENTS

Mehmet KARANFILOGLU¹, Murat SAGLAM²

ABSTRACT

Social media has a growing influence on societies, and its audiences are affected by the content and sharing behavior on these platforms. As a result, the masses can hold positive or negative perceptions of one another. In this context, Türkiye and Turks are also perceived in various ways by the masses living in the Balkans region. The Turks, who have had a presence in this region for centuries and have lived alongside the indigenous people, have left a lasting impact on Balkan societies. These impacts can be seen in the social media content that continues to shape perceptions today. When Türkiye and Turks are mentioned, thousands of positive or negative content are shared in the Balkans. Although some of this content

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may positively impact the image of Türkiye and Turks, some may contribute to a negative perception. This study focuses on the image and perception of Türkiye and Turks shaped by social media. Through a qualitative research study conducted with students from the Balkans studying in Turkey, three themes were identified: Perception of Turkish Identity, Turkish Culture Perceptions, and Other Factors that Impact the Turkish/Türkiye Image on Social Media.

Keywords: Image, Social Media, Perception, Türkiye, Turkish.

SOSYAL MEDYA VASITASIYLA TÜRK/TÜRKİYE

İMAJI VE ALGISI:

BALKAN ÖĞRENCİLERİ

Öz

Sosyal medya giderek büyüyen etkisiyle toplumları sarmalamaktadır. Bu platformlardaki kitleler, içerikler ve paylaşım davranışı ile birbirini etkilemektedir. Böylece kitleler birbirleri hakkında olumlu veya olumsuz birtakım düşüncelere sahip olabilmektedir. Türkiye ve Türkler de bu bağlamda, Balkanlar coğrafyasında yaşayan kitleler nezdinde çeşitli şekillerde değerlendirilmektedir. Geçmişten bu yana bu coğrafyada söz sahibi olmuş, beraber yaşamış olan Türkler, Balkan toplumları üzerinde çeşitli etkiler bırakmıştır. Bu etkiler beraberinde bugün şekillenmeye devam eden sosyal medya paylaşımlarını bırakmıştır. Bugün Türkiye ve Türkler denilince, Balkanlarda paylaşılan binlerce olumlu veya olumsuz içeriğe rastlanmaktadır. Bu içerikler bazen Türkiye ve Türk imajını olumlu yönde etkilese de bazen de olumsuz şekillenmiş olan Türkiye ve Türk algısını beslemektedir.

Bu çalışma sosyal medya vasıtası ile şekillenen Türk/Türkiye imajı ve algısı üzerine eğilmektedir. Çalışma kapsamında yürütülen nitel bir araştırma çalışması ile Türkiye’de okumakta olan Balkanlardan gelen öğrenciler incelenmiştir. Araştırma sonunda üç adet tema elde edilmiştir: Perception of Turkish Identity, Turkish Culture Perceptions, ve Other Factors that Impact the Turkish/Türkiye Image on Social Media

Anathar Kelimeler: İmaj, Sosyal Medya, Algı, Türkiye, Turkish.

INTRODUCTION

As the possibilities of new media increase, it attracts the attention of an increasing number of users. The representation of individuals and organizations in the new media, especially social media, is increasing, and in this regard, more notions of individuals and organizations are being formed. Thus, with the increasing impact of individuals and organizations whose representation in social media increases, the impact of new media creates an individual and corporate image.

Image for organizations means ideas that have arisen in the minds of investors, stakeholders, customers, and image management is understood as the positive management of these ideas (Chaturvedi & Gupta, 2014). Since the image is manageable, it also includes some factors that are not within the institution’s sphere of influence. Because the image can be formed by the effect of some conscious and pre-planned activity, or it can be formed by being influenced by some negative, unwanted, or unexpected situation. Individuals in social media, in particular, the image management processes of people

called the phenomenon, influencer, social media celebrity, or other names and names known in traditional media are also shaped by the impact of non-professionally managed situations conscious image studies in organizations.

Image design can be seen as an element of marketing, especially marketing communication. Social media, one of the most important outputs of new media, plays an increasingly significant role in today's marketing business (Kaushik, 2012). Web 2.0 and other digital improvements may make image management possible in social media, which requires social media management.

Social media use in image management is indispensable, although the influence level of organizations and individuals changes. The primary consideration here is the practical usage of social media. While the effective use of social media can create a positive image, its ineffective use can result in organizations' and individuals' undesired perception levels.

The image of a country, as viewed through the lens of public diplomacy, is crucial. Other countries' perception of Türkiye and its national identity can significantly impact their actions toward the country's business image. It is particularly significant in the Balkan region, which is the focus of this research. The perception of Turkish identity in these countries has always held significant importance for the Republic of Türkiye (Akova, 2012: 170).

THE BALKANS AND THE IMAGE OF TURKISH-TÜRKIYE

Since the Balkan countries lie on the transition roads, she has witnessed the foundation and collapse of many civilizations. Hence her name has been mentioned in every period of history with wars, migrations, and conflicts (Ekici, 2017: 7). Geographically, the mountainous geography begins on the Adriatic coast and follows the Sava and Danube rivers is referred to as the Balkans. Based on the geographical maps changing according to different definitions, it is known that the geography of the Balkans, dominated by mountainous countries, also hosts plains concerning the surroundings of rivers and northern parts (Bayraktar, 2013: 224; Akova, 2012: 170-172). Today, the geography of the Balkans, home to twelve separate sovereign states, is of immense importance in world politics related to cultural and ethnic diversity. As of 2022, the Balkans is the area that includes Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Türkiye, and Greece. Today more than fifty million people live in this geography (Bilgi and Akyürek, 2012: 3; Bozkurt, 2010: 52-53).

People living in the geography of the Balkans continued their lives first under the rule of the Hellenic Civilization, then the Roman and Byzantine Empires, and finally the Ottoman Empire for almost 550 years. In the historical process of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans experienced its most stable periods, forming a prominent position with cultural, economic, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and many elements that we can emulate. The Ottoman Empire, which left historical traces in the

geography of the Balkans, not only expanded its lands but also turned to Europe for political, economic, and even cultural changes (Bayraktar, 2013: 225). For such a change, the Balkan Peninsula served as a bridge or springboard in Ottoman relations with European powers. As Sander said, The Ottoman Empire did not force the Christian people to embrace the religion of Islam, especially those living in the Balkans (Sander, 2000:180). However, the previous dominant powers that ruled the Balkan countries did not recognize the same tolerance as the Ottoman Empire. While the Balkans were governed by the “Divide et Impera” principle during Roman times, the Byzantines employed methods and techniques that continue their influence on the Balkans to this day with the process of Slavization. The Ottoman Empire was not in any epoch of history, notably in the last two centuries, a country with strong social ties and social integration with a strong central authority in the Balkans. During the Ottoman period, there was no common social culture and engagement in the Balkans. During the relevant period, the population of the Balkan countries could feel that they belonged to social, cultural, religious, or many other groups that were incompatible with each other (Bilgi and Akyürek, 2012: 3). The Ottoman Empire was, until the 19th century, a supranational (or rather non-state) empire with medieval elements, in which the bureaucracy was in the position of being the only joint institution that bound (but could not unify) the entire population. According to Todorova (2010:328), there is no doubt that the Ottoman Empire did not form an integrated societal structure; some Balkan historians fail to understand the perception that this

empire did not even attempt to achieve such integration, let alone assimilation.

Considering the different geographies they live in today, Turks are among the few nations with a significant difference between their political and cultural borders. The Turkish presence in the world is classically expressed in a vast geography, stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China. The religions and cultures of the nations, which are the other actors of the acculturation process in the preservation of identity and culture in the above geography, have influenced options such as retaining Turkish identity or its assimilation (Öztürk, 2018: 29).

Turkish-Ottoman rule in the Balkans began in the mid-14th century. As reported by İnalçık, as a result of the 1354 earthquake, the walls of some Byzantine castles in the Gallipoli region were destroyed, and the troops in search of gas, accepting the natural disaster as a sign from god, captured the first garrisons in the European continent (İnalçık, 2018: 51). In the following century, because of incessant conquests, the geography of the Balkans was entirely under Ottoman rule. The Ottoman Empire, having overcome the greatest obstacle to centralization with the conquest of Istanbul in 1453, accelerated its expansion into the Balkans and laid the foundations for a reign that would last more than four centuries. With the conquest of Belgrade by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1521, the conquest of the Balkans was complete. The Battle of Mohàcs, which took place in 1526, resulted in the victory of the Ottoman armies. As a result of the Mohàcs victory, Hungarian forces claiming rights over

the Balkans were defeated, and the duration of Ottoman dominance in the region was ensured. After the Mohàcs victory, Sultan Suleiman claimed sovereignty in Balkan geography and throughout the European Christian world (İnalçık, 2018:153). The Grand Vizier Andarl established the Janissary Corps due to the increasing number of captives taken during conquests. These soldiers, who were recruited from non-Muslim villages in Anatolia, were incorporated into the permanent army of the state (İnalçık, 2018: 57).

The Janissary Corps, which provided essential human resources for young people in Balkan geography, became one of the sole representatives of state authority in the bureaucratic functioning of the empire. The Ottoman administration retained its influence in the Balkans into the 19th century, when the effects of the nationalist movement, which gained strength because of the French Revolution, began to be felt in the Ottoman administration. The nationalist movement and its core values, which spread over time, caused uprisings of non-Muslim ethnic groups under Ottoman rule. At this point, the religious and ethnic provocations of the Russian tsardom, which were based on religious unity, developed a policy of warm seas against the orthodox peoples of the Balkans, allowed the peoples of imperial rank to become proxies, and opened the geography of the Balkans for proxy wars. As a result of the Russo-Turkish War, referred to in Turkish history as the '93 War, Tsarist Russia even brought its soldiers near Istanbul, forcing the Ottoman Empire into a peace treaty with harsh terms. The Treaty of San Stefano, historically significant, resulted in granting extensive privileges and large tracts of land to the Balkan states that were beginning

to declare independence. The concessions made with this agreement were so significant that the other great powers of the time were alarmed by the increasing Russian influence in the region and the success of the small states born of the idea of nationalism. As a result of this process, the parties that gathered in Berlin four months after the agreement sought to use the Berlin Agreement to ease the strain on San Stefano. The regional nationalist movement, which developed with Russian spur and froze because of economic and political aid in the region, ignited the series of events beginning in the early 14th century (Solnon, 2019:588).

After the hardships of the Balkan Wars and the First World Wars, the ethnic groups of Slavic origin came together under the name of a single state. This state, initially called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, was later called Yugoslavia. Today, seven autonomous sovereign states have emerged from the state representing more than half of the Balkans in terms of human and economic size. This aspect of Yugoslavia intricately links Yugoslav history with recent Balkan history (Bilgi and Akyürek, 2012: 3).

As a result of the claims of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to expand their lands and open living space for their people, the occupations of these two regimes have begun across Europe. After Italy invaded Albania and Germany invaded Poland in 1941, the Germans also occupied the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Jusep Broz was one of the partisan leaders who organized during the occupation process. Under the chair of Broz Tito, the AVNOJ (Yugoslav Antifascist National Liberation Council) was convened, and the foundation stone for the

federal state administration was laid. The administration established in 1943 was known as the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia, and after the war, it became the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1946. With another change in 1963, the country was renamed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and was known under that name until the country's dissolution (Bozkurt, 2010:54).

The oppressive effect of the Soviet Union was not felt strongly in Balkan geography, unlike other examples in Eastern Europe. Especially Enver Hoxha Albania and Tito Yugoslavia tried not to be under the influence of Soviet administrations due to disagreements in different areas (Moses, 2008: 408-409). As a result, Yugoslavia joined the non-aligned movement in 1979 and could not withstand the strains of the bipolar world order. The troubles that began with the death of state founder Tito in 1980 could not be avoided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc in the early 1990s, and the process of disintegration that would eventually lead to civil war began (Moses, 2008: 408-409). As a result of the ongoing civil war, Slovenia declared its independence for the first time on December 23, 1990. In the following months, Macedonia declared independence in January 1991, Croatia in June 1991, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 1992. Serbia and Montenegro united to form the Federal Republic of New Yugoslavia. However, Montenegro declared its independence in 2006 through an independence referendum. Following the trend of disintegration, Kosovo also unilaterally declared its independence in 2008. Despite Serbia's best efforts, this secession brought the process of the disintegration of Yugoslavia to an end (Bozkurt, 2010: 55).

In the process of disintegration, the Bosnian people undoubtedly experienced the most extraordinary hardship. As a result of the 1992 independence referendum, the country opted for secession and declared its independence despite the boycott and efforts of the Serb elements that encompassed it. Serb groups, unable to accept the situation, announced that they had proclaimed a Serbian republic in Bosnia and Herzegovina and launched a genocidal movement against the Muslim elements residing in the regions they claimed. The Serb genocide of Muslims in the region, declared a safe zone by the UN in 1993 after months of massacres of Muslims, went down in history as the bloodiest genocide Europe has seen since World War II (Akova, 2012: 186).

TÜRKIYE'S BALKAN POLICY AND RELATIONS WITH THE BALKAN STATES

With the founding of the Republic of Türkiye, Turkish foreign policy, shaped by the understanding of internal peace and peace in the world, has significantly contributed to the development of peaceful relations with the Balkan states. Following the death of Tito in 1980, the Republic of Türkiye, which initially maintained a policy of territorial integrity in the Balkans, was forced to recognize the independence of the countries that declared their independence successively in the Balkans after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fundamental change in the world order (Bilgiç and Akyürek, 2012:7). An examination of Türkiye's relations with the Balkan countries reveals that these relations progressed after the fall of the Soviet Union. In particular, the studies and projects conducted in the region under the Turkish

Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) have effectively developed Turkish perceptions in the region and built a bridge of hearts between the people of Türkiye region and Türkiye (Ekici, 2017: 7-9). Restoration of historic Ottoman-era buildings and infrastructure and superstructure support for newly established countries have placed Türkiye in an influential position in the geography of the Balkans. Relations with our neighbor Greece have been up and down over the same period. Relations on the continental shelf issue, attitudes on the Cyprus issue, and the impact of the Greek extreme right have deteriorated to the point where from time to time, a war is imminent. This, at times, fluctuating relationship process continues to this day (Bilgiç and Akyürek, 2012: 7).

The media and social media platforms are currently reporting extensively on the tensions between Greece and Türkiye, which are considered critical gateways to Europe amidst the chaos in Syria. However, an indistinguishable situation was that since the beginning of the 1980s, the Bulgarian government's policy of assimilation towards people of Turkish origin had forced the human community, which can be expressed in hundreds of thousands, to migrate to Türkiye. During this period, Turkish-Bulgarian relations went through a complicated process due to politics shaped by Turkish identity and Bulgarian nationalism. Therefore, since the late 19th and 20th centuries, the Balkans has been one of the most confused, troubled, and bloody regions of the world, and even today, it is a region in the center of Europe that has many problems both internally and externally (Mazower, 2001: 4- 9).). With the democratization of

the Soviet Union and Bulgaria's membership in the European Union (2007), tensions were reduced, and human rights violations were eliminated. Türkiye's attitude during the civil war and the political, financial, and social assistance it has shown to the newly established countries have been instrumental in establishing friendly relations between the Balkan countries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye continued its activities in the Balkans under the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Department (TIKA), established in 1992 (Bilgiç and Akyürek, 2012: 7).

IMAGE OF TURKISH AND TÜRKİYE VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has become a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and perceptions of different countries and cultures. Researchers have found that the use of social media and the subsequent knowledge production can have either positive or negative effects on one's image (Jeong & Jang, 2011; O'Connor, 2010). It is particularly true for Türkiye, which has recently been the focus of much attention due to its political and economic developments. In this article, we will explore the image of Türkiye and Türkiye on social media and how this image is constructed and perpetuated. One of the most prominent ways in which Türkiye is depicted on social media is through the use of hashtags and keywords. In this research, instead the term "Tukrey," "Türkiye" is used as defined in the circular "Use of the Expression of 'Türkiye' as a Trademark" published in the Turkish Official Gazette on December 4, 2021. This usage of the term "Türkiye" can be seen in official advertisements and

channels (Cumhurbaşkanlığı-İletişim-Başkanlığı, 2022). Additionally, after the circular, the name of the country is also commonly referred to as “Türkiye” in various foreign languages. Moreover, the hashtag #Türkiye is often used to promote Turkish tourism and cultural heritage. Likewise, keywords such as #topkapipalace and #istanbul are commonly used to highlight Türkiye’s historical and architectural significance (Best Hashtags, 2022). However, not all the hashtags and keywords associated with Türkiye on social media are positive. Throughout history, it has been observed that Turkey’s image can be negatively impacted within the context of political relations. The historical Armenian issue is particularly striking in how it has been portrayed as a negative image of Turkey and the Turkish people (Karagöz-Yerdelen, 2017: 57).

Another way Türkiye is portrayed on social media is through images and videos. Photos of the country’s stunning landscapes, historical sites, and delicious food are commonly shared on platforms like Instagram and Pinterest. Meanwhile, videos of traditional Turkish dance and music performances are popular on platforms like YouTube. However, not all the images and videos associated with Türkiye on social media are positive. For example, photos and videos of police brutality and protests are frequently shared, highlighting issues of political repression and human rights abuses in the country. The users’ political leanings can also influence how Türkiye is portrayed on social media. For example, pro-government accounts focus on the country’s economic and infrastructure developments, while opposition accounts focus on human rights issues and political repression (Yaveroğlu, 2015; Gün, 2019). Overall, the image of

Türkiye on social media is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the country's diverse culture, history, and politics. While some users focus on the positive aspects of Türkiye, such as its rich cultural heritage and stunning landscapes, others highlight the country's political and social challenges.

It is important to note that the portrayal of a country on social media does not necessarily reflect the country's reality, and it is crucial to gather information from multiple sources and approach information with a critical lens. The portrayal of a country on social media is shaped by various factors, such as the political context, the interests of media outlets, and the agendas of the users who create and share the content.

In conclusion, the image of Türkiye and Türkiye on social media is constructed through hashtags, keywords, images, and videos. The image is multifaceted and complex, reflecting the country's positive and negative aspects. While social media can be a valuable tool for learning about different cultures and countries, it is essential to approach the information and gather information from multiple sources critically.

METHODOLOGY

The views of eight university students from the Balkan country studying at Konya Selçuk University and Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University on "Turkish Identity and Perception in the Balkans" are analyzed. This research was conducted using the pattern of phenomenology (phenomenology), one of the qualitative research approaches. As is well known, phenomenology aims to uncover individuals' experiences, perceptions,

and meanings concerning a phenomenon. According to Creswell, phenomenology is a qualitative research approach in which one or more time-limited situations are studied using data collection tools (observations, interviews, audiovisual media, documents, reports) that encompass multiple sources and situations and themes related to the situation are defined (Creswell, 2008). 2007:36). The aim is to holistically analyze one or more of the participants' boundaries (environment, situation) (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013: 291). Questions on the perception of Turkish identity in the Balkan countries, its characteristics, and its interactions with other identities were formulated by the researcher using a semi-structured interview technique through focus group interviews (Öztürk, 2018: 10). The aim is to holistically analyze one or more situations within their context, taking into account factors such as the environment and specific circumstances (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013: 292). In phenomenological studies, the data sources must be selected from individuals who can experience and express the phenomenon. In this direction, the research was collected from eight students from the Balkans who continued their education at Selçuk University and Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University with the readily accessible case sampling method, one of the expedient sampling methods.

Focus group interviewing is to obtain in-depth and multi-dimensional qualitative information about participants' perspectives, experiences, experiences, tendencies, ideas, feelings, attitudes, and habits on a given topic. Focus group discussions are not about voicing opinions like accepted opinions but creating an environment that allows them to express their opinions

freely. The researcher's impartial behavior will contribute to this (Şahin, 2009: 27).

Focus group interview method with eight students selected by easily accessible sampling method in Konya and Karaman provinces. The research data consists of the opinions of eight students selected by criterion sampling. The following points were considered in selecting these eight students by criterion sampling.

- Being born and raised in one of the Balkan countries,
- The focus was determined as having answered the group interview voluntarily, willingly, and knowledgeable about the questions asked.

Moreover:

- It is assumed that participants represent the primary audience in a meaningful way.
- It is assumed that the participants perceive and answer the questions correctly.
- It is assumed that the researcher maintained a non-interfering stance and refrained from directing the participants in any way during the focus group interview.

The research examined the Turkish identity and perceptions of the participants in the Balkans. This process aims to uncover the "Turkish/Türkiye image on social media in Balkans" of eight students who continue their education at Selçuk and Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey Universities, both themselves and their acquaintances from whom live in the region they come.

For this purpose, the following research questions were formulated:

- How is the identity of Turks in the Balkans perceived concerning national, ethnic, political, and religious identities on social media?
- How do individuals in the Balkans expressing Turkish identity perceive their identity in the context of the country they reside in, as portrayed on social media?
- Where do individuals typically obtain most information about Turkish people and culture on social media? Are there any desires to reside in Türkiye permanently if given the opportunity, as portrayed on social media?
- Is there a correlation between an individual's family background, perceptions of Türkiye, and perceptions of Turkish people in their region of origin and their experiences upon visiting Türkiye, as portrayed on social media?

FINDINGS

The sample consists of eight people: Five females and three males. All participants are single. While five participants continued their undergraduate education, three continued their graduate education. When the income status of the participants is converted to TL, the average is between 1000 and 5000 TL due to the currencies of the countries they come from, family benefits, scholarships they received from various places, and the income of some of them: as a result, the part-time work in Türkiye. The interviewed participants were coded as (K1, C2, P3, P4, P5 and E1, M2 and E3).

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Positive Sub-Themes	Negative Sub-Themes
Perception of Turkish Identity	Hospitable	Conservative-Traditional
	Helpful	Fatalistic/Determinist
	Tolerant	Rude-Aggressive
	Honest	Cruel-Brutal
	Hardworking-Productive	Racist-Fascist
	Comply with the Rules	Violator
Turkish Culture Perceptions	Freedom	Sharia Follower
	Democracy	Despot/Barbarian
	Equality	Unfair
	Respect for Human Rights	No Human Rights
Other Factors that Impact the Turkish/ Türkiye Image on Social Media	Television's Productions	Familiar Friends
	Advertisings	General Jurisdiction in My Country
	Sports Competitions	News
	Music	
	Familiar Friends	
	General Jurisdiction in My Country	

Theme 1: Perception of Turkish Identity

The perception of Turkish identity on social media is a complex and multifaceted topic shaped by various factors such as political context, media representation, and user agendas. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become powerful tools for shaping public opinion and perceptions of different countries and cultures. In the case of Türkiye, the image portrayed on

social media is often shaped by hashtags and keywords. For instance, hashtags like #Türkiye are often used to promote Turkish tourism and cultural heritage, while keywords like “Ottoman Empire” and “*Bosphorus*” highlight historical and architectural significance. However, not all hashtags and keywords associated with Türkiye on social media are positive, and some are used to express opposition to the current government and to highlight concerns about human rights and political repression.

Contents also play a significant role in shaping the perception of Turkish identity on social media. Photos of the country’s stunning landscapes and historical sites, as well as videos of traditional Turkish dance and music performances, are commonly shared on platforms like Instagram and YouTube. However, not all images and videos associated with Türkiye on social media are positive, and some show police brutality and protests, highlighting issues of political repression and human rights abuses in the country. The way Türkiye is portrayed on social media can also be influenced by the users’ political leanings, with pro-government accounts tending to focus on the country’s economic and infrastructure developments. In contrast, opposition accounts tend to focus on human rights issues and political repression. The perception of Turkish identity on social media is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the country’s diverse culture, history, and politics. While some users focus on the positive aspects of Türkiye, such as its rich cultural heritage and stunning landscapes, others highlight the country’s political and social challenges. It is essential to approach the information critically and gather information

from multiple sources to have a holistic understanding of the topic.

Following the analysis, two sub-theme have been formulated, which can be divided into two positions: The positive sub-themes: *Hospitable, Helpful, Tolerant, Honest, Hardworking-Productive, and Comply with the Rules* along with the negatives: *Conservative-Traditional, Fatalistic/Determinist, Rude-Aggressive, Cruel-Brutal, Racist-Fascist, Violator*.

The group of positive sub-themes indicates that the perception of Turkish identity via social media has a positive image and evaluation in the Balkan countries; however, on the other dimension, the negative sub-theme also relates to negative Turkish identity perception. Participants generally express positive statements together with negative statements. Contrasting statements and evaluations in the opposite direction show that there is content on the Turkish identity on social media in both directions. Some of the participant statements are as follows:

K4: "Before I came to Türkiye, I used to think that the Turks were very rude; my family would say that the roots of the Turks are barbarians; they do not use cutlery, they attack foreigners, and they do not value women. They watch many videos that show them that on Facebook."

E1: "They told me similar things; my family was worried when I came here. We have been watching horrible things on YouTube. However, after I came to Türkiye, I realized that Türkiye is not what they say it is."

K1: “I live in a small town in the Balkans, in a mountainous village, as Turks express. So it is normal for my family to worry about these issues on Facebook because many negative stories about Turks and Turkish culture vary according to countries, regions, and sub-regions are shown.”

K2: “I was also told that the Turks are very hospitable, helpful, and tolerant, so I wanted to continue my education in Türkiye. I saw many commercials on social media. However, the people of Turkish origin are more dominant in the region I come from.”

E3: “Before I came to Türkiye, I thought there was no functioning democracy in the country. There were terrorist attacks all over the country at that time. We have seen all these on the news and social media platforms. All this worried my family and me. However, I have been here for two years, and everything is perfect.”

A critical finding of the research is that in the history textbooks of some Balkan countries, there are negative statements about both the Ottoman and the Turkish Republic, and it is assumed that the reasons for the people reading these books vary from primary education to higher education develop a negative perception towards the Republic of Türkiye and Turkish identity. Because the young people who read these books have, over time, developed a negative perception of Turkish identity and citizens.

E1: “Bad stories about Turks and especially Islam are told in the stories of the Balkan countries and the

history and literature books of some countries, these stories are about the Turks who lead a religious and nomadic life, and they both cause a terrible perception of Islam and the Turks who are unsympathetic, unruly, and unclean. It is emphasized that these stories are familiar, especially in places where the Christian population is common, and that this story and the individuals who receive this education negatively affect Turkish culture and perception.”

The participants were asked to define the concept of Turkish identity and to report any experiences of discrimination or marginalization they or anyone they know may have faced due to this identity. The following responses were obtained in response to this question.

K3: “When you think about the perception of Turkish identity in the Balkans, you cannot make a clear distinction because more than one race and nationality living in the Balkans, and they got married and related over time, so let us say hybridity is more dominant. For example, I have many acquaintances whose male Albanian wife is Macedonian and whose residence is in Romania. Therefore, are you a Muslim or a Turk at the same time as these people? Different answers can be given to all questions, such as.”

E2: “For example, one of my friend’s parents is of Bulgarian origin, and the other is of Turkish origin. When we asked our friend what nationality he was at school, he said he was 50% Turkish and 50% Bulgarian, but they lived in Macedonia. We used to think Turkish identity was more dominant as my friend especially supported Türkiye in national team matches.”

In this regard, K2: also mentioned that he had an acquaintance and stated that he had adopted the Turkish identity with the answer, “*Croatian woman married a Kosovar of Turkish origin.*”

P4: “Although I agree with the friend, Turkish identity in the Balkans differs according to region. In other words, while the Turkish identity and culture are more dominant in the regions where Muslims live, especially Muslim identity is not welcomed in the regions where Christians live. It is even associated with terrorist organizations.”

During the research, the participants provided the following statements regarding freedom and the culture of belonging and ownership in their respective countries.

K2: “In my country, you exist through individual efforts. Thus, what you do yourself is what you are. Family support ends after you come of age, or you must earn your place in society through your efforts. However, there are powerful ties and solidarity among people in Türkiye. Even though I am outside of this group, they embrace me. Whenever I want, I can feel the support of my school and friends behind me.”

Furthermore, Turks living in the Balkan countries do not use and see Turkish identity as an ethnic identity. Therefore, they emphasize that Turkish identity is a national identity lived and nurtured in culture.

E2: “There is a phrase in the Balkans, they say, “blood is not water,” about the children’s similarity to the original race. In other words, if the children are Turkish, they can be easily recognized among Balkan communities with their temperament, behavior, facial

features, and other features that we cannot count. In other words, we know people in Skopje by their faces, Turks, Serbians, Romans, Macedonians, Greeks.”

Expressing similar situations, they stated with the following sentence that long-standing traditions and customs positively affect the perception of Turkish identity today.

K2: “Turks living in the Balkans have their customs and traditions. For example, giving alms to someone on the road, pouring water behind the passenger, traditional Turkish wedding ceremonies, casting lead, and traditional Turkish food, here are dried beans, kebab, and rice. These artistic images make it easy to distinguish Turkish culture in the Balkans.”

K5: “There are two types of Turkish perception in the Balkans: the first is the Turkish identity, which is fed by the traditions and customs, and the second is the Turkish identity that was formed together with the Ottoman Empire and the republic. There is a Turkish identity formed especially under the influence of Islam; here are mosques, tombs, and madrasas.”

According to the participants, there is a perception of having a shared ancestry through consanguinity and a bad reputation on social media regarding perceptions of Turkish identity in the Balkans. This perception is evident in the statements provided by the participants. In this regard;

E1: “Social media manipulates perception a lot. We can come across thousands of videos and images about Turks. After all, when similar things and stories are told in history books, you think Turks are cruel

people. Maybe genetically, I can be Turkish, too; no one knows. However, after the information we have been exposed to, no one wants to be Turkish. I came because I do not believe that what is told there is untrue. Yes, I see bad things in some places, but Turks generally are not monsters.”

E2: “For example, if we look at ethnicity, I am not Turkish. However, Turkish identity is an identity we adopt as a family, a cultural identity that has been going on since the past.”

K2: “There are too many Turks in the Balkans. However, it is impossible to come across a pure-blooded Turk. Many nations have been living together here, especially since the Ottoman period. According to the media, they do not exist, but you know. In time, various nations have married each other; a hybrid society has formed, that is, an everyday life, a hybrid cultural identity formation.”

Participant K3 highlighted that it is impossible to speak of pure identity or culture due to the Balkans’ historical intermarriage and coexistence. Accordingly states that:

K3: “It is not appropriate to speak of a pure identity and gene in individuals living in the Balkans, Bulgarian interest, Serbian interest, even other nationalities.”

Therefore, they stated that Turkish identity is perceived as a “*cultural national identity*” that creates traditions, customs, and traditions specific to Turkish identity rather than just a racial community.

K1: “You know, in countries and regions, with exceptions, three generations (grandparents, mothers, fathers, and grandchildren, that is, youth and

children), different generations and cultures exist simultaneously. If you go and ask the Turkish-origin grandparents about Türkiye and Turkish identity, they will give you a positive answer if it is not on social media. However, if you go and ask someone of the same age who is not of Turkish origin, they will give you a negative answer on this matter, especially if you are a Muslim. Therefore, the answer to this question varies according to country and region. However, I can say there is a positive perception towards Türkiye and Turkish citizens and identity in the Balkan states, apart from extreme racist groups. We do believe that social media lies.”

The thoughts on “perceptions of identity” among individuals residing in the Balkans should be acknowledged as multifaceted and studied subtly, considering the diversity and variations within different countries, regions, provinces, districts, and neighborhoods.

Theme 2: Turkish Culture Perceptions

Similarly, as the first theme, the second theme can also be divided into two sub-themes related. The positive sub-themes regarding the perception of Turkish culture on social media: *Freedom, Democracy, Equality, and Respect for Human Rights*, while the negatives are: *Sharia Follower, Despot/Barbarian, Unfair, and No Human Rights*.

Firstly, they indicated that it has the image of a country where the religion of Islam is equated with Sharia, women are forced to wear headscarves, and people are unfair. The citizens of Balkan countries’ perception of Turkish identity is seen as a cultural identity, culture, that is,

Turkish customs and traditions, spoken language, and a national identity mostly related to Islam rather than an ethnic identity. Some participant's views are as follows:

E1: "In our region, they call us an ethnic community in Serbia rather than the Turkish nation. They are trying to cut us off from Türkiye and the Turkish world, trying to assimilate us from Turkish culture, but everything about us is compatible with Turkish culture. Our traditions, customs, meals, weddings, holidays, and many more."

K1: "In our history lesson, our teacher used to talk about the Turks as a barbaric and despotic race. Turks used to say that they were despots/barbarians, they did not recognize rules, there was no equality between men and women in Turks, and women were bought and sold like a commodity. He would mention that this situation was associated with the acceptance of Islam by the Turks and that they preferred Sharia instead of democracy in daily life. Therefore, she stated that women are forced to wear headscarves compulsorily and that the perception of Türkiye and Turkish identity is harmful."

K3 stated that their teachers at school caused this situation, they realized that they did not have such a situation when they grew up, but some of their friends still had negative thoughts against Türkiye.

K3: "When I said Turkish culture, I thought Turks were Arabs; I thought they were very bigoted and reactionary; I did not believe that there were human rights in Türkiye. Moreover, in some parts of the Balkans, there are still people who believe like that."

K2: “Before I came here, I thought it was a society made up of bearded men with burqas, as I saw in old movies. Because that is how we were taught the perception of Turks in our schools; nevertheless, when I came here and lived, especially when I started to get involved with Turkish TV series, I realized this was not the case. Of course, Turkish cuisine has a significant role in all this change. I cannot imagine a winding and non-rotating life today .”

E3: “I live in the Roma neighborhood; Turks living in the area we live in are generally cultured and respectful people, so I decided to continue my education in Türkiye because of this perception; it is cheaper than other countries.”

The participants emphasized that the word “*Turk*” in the Balkans means “*Muslim*”; therefore, the expression of Turkish identity through the combination of Islam creates a common culture (Turkish-Islamic culture). Hence, they indicated that Muslim Turk is not typical in the Balkans since Turks mean Muslims.

K3: “For example, my mother is of the Catholic faith. My father is Turkish and Muslim. However, although my father is a staunch Turkish nationalist, my mother never spoke about my mother’s religious and national identity. However, he tries to conform to Turkish-Islamic traditions. For example, my mother fasts in Ramadan goes to the mosque in the evenings, sacrifices, and only helps my father in ceremonies such as marriage, mawlid, and death. However, he never compels my mother and my mother’s relatives, such as this, this is that, do this.”

Participants, when asked, “*Are you Turkish or Muslim?*” in the Balkans, states that the perception of “*Muslim*” and “*Turkish*” identity varies between three or four generations, as mentioned above.

E2: “Being a Romanian Turk is equivalent to being a Muslim. No one asks us if we are Muslim. They say you are Turkish. They also know well that saying “ Turkish “ means “ be Muslim.”

K2: “My grandfather and grandmother adhere to Turkish traditions daily. They pray and try to live in Islam. My father married my mother of Serbian and Catholic descent. Later, my father created a hybrid between Turkish and Serbian cultures. It is interesting, but he goes to the mosque and drinks, for example. We are two brothers. My grandmother and grandfather raised me, so Turkish culture outweighs me. My grandmother and Serbian grandfather raised my older brother, so Serbian culture and beliefs are more dominant in my older brother. However, it is not as sharp as it used to be. A postmodern culture that shapes us like the whole world; therefore, the postmodern culture that shaped Turkish Islamic, Christian, and many other things are also reshaping the Balkan culture.”

However, another question posed was: “Is there a correlation between an individual’s family background, perceptions of Türkiye, and perceptions of Turkish people in their region of origin and their experiences upon visiting Türkiye?” E1, who participated in his question, summarized the situation as follows:

E1 “Türkiye and the Turkish people are very important to us; we love our Motherland and the precious Turkish people. Our perception of Türkiye does not change when we go to Türkiye or watch the news on the media or YouTube, but since we come from abroad, it is difficult for us to be treated like immigrants and refugees, just like our brothers who immigrated to Türkiye from the Balkans. We know that long ago, we were taken from the Karamanids and other principalities and settled in the Balkan geography, and we flew the glorious Turkish flag here for hundreds of years. We love our homeland, Türkiye, and there are immigrants, immigrants. We want to be hosted as Türkiye’s children, not because we are öz türk (real Turkish).”

Theme 3: Other Factors that Impact the Turkish/ Türkiye Image on Social Media

While analyzing the data within the scope of the research, it was concluded that most elements (positive or negative) influenced the participants’ opinions, and they did not think only from social media. For this reason, “*Other Factors that Impact the Turkish/Türkiye Image on Social Media*” has been formulated as a third theme title. Under this theme, it was possible to group the elements as positive and negative. Positive elements include *Television Productions, Advertising, Sports Competitions, Music, Familiar Friends*, and *General Jurisdiction in My Country*; on the other hand, negative elements are listed as follows: *Familiar Friends, General Jurisdiction in My Country*, and *News*. It can be observed that some sub-theme names overlap. It is because while the participants

used expressions that align with these themes to convey negative experiences, they also used some expressions to express positive emotions. As a result, both positive and negative sub-themes are included in the themes identified.

Social media has a very intense usage rate by the participants and their circles. As seen in studies conducted around the world, 76.2 percent of south-eastern Europe, located in the Balkans, is seen as social media users (WeAreSocial, 2022). Therefore, with such a usage amount, it is unthinkable that the news made on social media does not affect the views of the masses living in the Balkans. In particular, the perception of positive or negative Turkish and Türkiye images in the Balkan countries seems to have been affected by this situation. Interviews with the participants support this situation.

The sources of information for participants about Türkiye include music groups, sports competitions, social media posts, promotional posters, trusted friends, general perceptions of their country, and visual and print media news and images. These sources form the basis of information for participants and shape their perceptions of Turkish identity and culture. Social media applications and news in visual and written media can positively and negatively impact these perceptions. Negative news about issues such as martyrs, molestation, rape, and murders of women, especially in the media, can have a detrimental effect on the perception of Türkiye and Turkish identity in the Balkans. Conversely, music competitions, concerts, sports competitions, and, notably, Turkish TV series widely followed by Balkan communities can positively impact their perceptions of Türkiye and the Turkish people.

Table 2: Which country would you like to be a citizen of if you had the chance to obtain second citizenship?

Countries (Participants)	Türkiye (P3-K5)	France (K2)
	USA (K1-K4)	Germany (F8)
	England (K7)	Sweden (K6)

The responses to the question about the status of obtaining citizenship, which was asked in some of the interviews, also provide insight into the image of Türkiye. Only two participants wanted to acquire citizenship in Türkiye, while most preferred Western and Northern European countries. It highlights how the content on social media can influence perceptions of a country.

CONCLUSION

Perception by others plays a crucial role in determining the success of a state's foreign policy, as opposed to how the state sees itself (Türbedar, 2012: 1). Although this aspect was not explicitly evaluated in this study, it can be argued that it is closely related to public diplomacy. It is known that public opinion can also influence success in the international arena rather than just being managed by government officials through traditional diplomatic methods. It can be argued that public opinion can be even more effective. Therefore, the interaction of social media and image, the focus of this research, becomes essential in this context.

While social media offers many opportunities for communication and interaction for the masses, it can also harm the information of the masses with disinformation. As a result, the image of countries can be affected positively or negatively. Therefore, it can be argued

that while social media offers opportunities for certain situations, it also poses various risks.

Three themes related to the perception of the Turkish/Türkiye image in the Balkans on social media emerged within the scope of the research: *Perception of Turkish Identity, Turkish Culture Perceptions, and Other Factors that Impact the Turkish/Türkiye Image on Social Media*. The presence and dominance of Turks in the Balkans have also been suggested as a factor that shapes the content on social media and has been influencing social perception for a long time. In the Balkans, due to the coexistence of people of various races for a long time, they have influenced each other culturally and through intermarriage, leading to a hybrid culture and community. This hybrid society, shaped by regional and religious distinctions, has caused conflicts among themselves and other states, particularly during periods of separatist movements and wars in the 19th century and beyond. Although the Balkans experienced a relatively stable, peaceful, and prosperous period under Ottoman rule, stability and peace deteriorated during this process. In the following years, the Balkan wars, the 1st and 2nd World Wars, and the regional wars that emerged in specific periods of this process, led to the emergence of various ethnic and religious nations that had not been seen before in the region. Therefore, Turkish identity and perception in the Balkans have been perceived as a colonial and hegemonic element.

However, compared with other imperial examples in history, it can be seen that Turkish rule and administration were far from oppressive and egalitarian towards all individuals living in the Balkans, regardless of their

religious background. All nation-states used the perception of Turkish identity and culture in association with their historical-cultural perception to consolidate their national foundations and write their national histories. Therefore, as the participants stated, it causes some states to develop negative prejudices against Türkiye because of the negative statements regarding the perception of Turkish and Turkish culture in their history books. This situation is also reflected on social media, and the Turkish/Türkiye perception may be affected positively or negatively due to posts made without questioning their accuracy.

The third finding obtained in the study was the positive change in the participants' perceptions, who had the opportunity to be informed and contacted about Türkiye, especially with the developing information and communication technologies and transportation opportunities. The main reason is that the perception is shaped by various past situations and shares, related to the theme of Other Elements that Impact the Turkish/Türkiye Image on Social Media. Contrary to the national education systems in their own countries, Türkiye is a highly developed country that values human rights, has developed in sports, culture, and arts, respects and gives importance to religious feelings and beliefs, and has a positive attitude towards discourses. This situation, which is primarily highlighted in the international press and social media but creates a negative perception of both the Turkish identity and perception and the international outlook of Türkiye, is not comprehensive. As stated in the eight-person sample created for the research, it is observed in their demeanor and behavior among the participants living in Türkiye, continuing their education,

and participating in the research. Another finding in this context is the positive effect of Turkish television series and programs on the region's citizens. Balkan societies, which have lived together for more than 500 years, have had the opportunity to explore the shared cultural pool thanks to Turkish TV series and programs. The "little differences and the excess of similarities" emphasized in these Turkish TV series and programs have created a positive image of Turkish identity and perception among individuals living in all Balkan lands, and they have been instrumental in developing a positive attitude towards the perception of Turkish identity.

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