Gender perceptions on digital platforms: A study on TikTok users' awareness of gender roles

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Abstract: Digital platforms significantly influence gender awareness and perceptions, serving as spaces where gender roles are both reinforced and challenged. TikTok, one of the most popular platforms where users can create content, employs short videos and personalized algorithms to shape social dynamics. As digital natives, Generation Z forms the primary audience globally. This study investigates how young TikTok users in Turkey perceive and interpret gender roles and representations within platform content. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 undergraduate students, and data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Results show that participants are highly aware of gender roles depicted on TikTok, but their interpretations generally align with traditional gender norms. The content often reproduces dominant stereotypes: female representations emphasize beauty, personal care, and daily routines, while male portrayals focus on power, authority, and public participation. The study also reveals that participants critically recognize how algorithms influence their digital experiences. Despite the prevalence of traditional roles, users maintain a strong critical perspective. These findings provide valuable insights for developing media literacy programs and promoting more inclusive gender representations on digital platforms.

Keywords: Gender representations, Gender roles, New media, Social media, TikTok.

1. Introduction

Traditional institutions such as the family, school, and peer groups have long shaped individuals' social values and identities [1]. However, in the current media landscape, social media has become a central actor in identity construction. As Castells [2] asserts, the *Information Age* is characterized by individuals' existence through the messages they transmit and receive. In this new digital context, concepts such as power and freedom are redefined through digital networks in which individuals participate and the communities they engage with.

Among social media platforms, TikTok, particularly popular with Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), represents a unique space for the creation, distribution, and consumption of content [3, 4]. Its participatory structure enables users to function simultaneously as content producers and consumers, fostering the reproduction of cultural norms and, notably, patriarchal ideologies and traditional gender roles [1]. TikTok's popularity is especially significant in Turkey, where it ranks among the most downloaded and used applications [5].

This study examines how gender perceptions and awareness are shaped by TikTok content among students at Kastamonu University's Faculty of Communication. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research investigates students' usage patterns, perceptions of gender roles in content, and the broader implications of social media for shaping and negotiating gender norms. Findings reveal that

social media platforms such as TikTok function not merely as tools for communication but also as cultural spaces where gender roles are constantly reinforced, contested, and reshaped.

1.1. Social Media and Gender Representations

Before the rise of social media, traditional mass communication tools controlled the flow of information and limited content production exclusively to professional sources. In contrast, social media platforms have decentralized production, enabling more democratic participation, while simultaneously removing traditional mechanisms of quality control [6-8]. This characteristic is particularly evident on platforms such as TikTok, which offer anonymity and ease of access; users have gained unprecedented freedom of expression [9, 10]. These platforms represent dynamic sociocultural ecosystems in which identities are performed, and values are contested [11]. Their impact extends far beyond virtual spaces, permeating the structure of contemporary life. Among the domains affected by these platforms are the roles and representations of gender.

Gender is a socially constructed framework that shapes expectations and societal roles [12, 13]. As Milestone and Meyer [14] state, gender encompasses social behaviors and roles that go beyond biological binaries. These roles are embedded in social norms: men are often associated with leadership and public authority, while women are identified with caregiving and domestic responsibilities [15, 16]. Connell emphasizes that gender is a processual phenomenon shaped by history and the present [17].

Building on the understanding that gender is socially constructed, Judith Butler's concept of performativity challenges the notion of gender as a fixed essence. According to Butler, gender is a formal structure repeated through gestures, rituals, and behaviors that reinforce what is perceived as "masculinity" or "femininity" [18]. Digital environments add new dimensions to this performativity, offering users innovative spaces to express, experiment with, and even subvert gender. Meanwhile, Raewyn Connell conceptualizes gender as a dynamic social practice embedded in broader structures of power. For Connell, gender is not merely an individual identity but a relational, dynamic, and holistic structure shaped by collective practices and institutionalized hierarchies [19]. This framework is particularly meaningful for platforms like TikTok, where algorithmically mediated factors such as visibility, trend culture, and peer approval intersect with users' self-presentations and gender performances.

In her groundbreaking *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway erases the boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, portraying identities as hybrid, constructed, and fluid [20]. This perspective is based on the idea that users actively construct their digital selves within technologically mediated environments. Both traditional and digital media reinforce the public/private divide by positioning men in power-laden public spaces, while associating women with the private sphere through emotional or physical attributes [21]. Research consistently demonstrates that media representations contribute to gender inequality [22-24]. Social media accelerates this process and enables the global circulation of gendered patterns [25, 26].

In the context of Turkey, patriarchal structures continue to regulate women's participation in public and economic life. Dildar [27] shows that religiosity and traditional norms significantly limit women's participation in the labor force. Cultural constraints and the gender-based division of domestic labor further exacerbate inequality. Patriarchy is seen as one of the fundamental barriers to gender equality in Turkish society [28]. Although social media in Turkey has become a space for feminist solidarity and digital sisterhood [29] it is also a medium where digital violence, harassment, and sexist discourse circulate [30]. These contradictory dynamics render social media a complex arena where gender is both contested and reproduced.

1.2. TikTok: Platform Structure and Cultural Power

Platforms like TikTok allow for digital self-representation, enabling users to control the presentation of their identities, especially gender. Thus, TikTok emerges not only as a space that reinforces traditional gender roles but also as one with the potential to challenge and transform them.

This transformation reshapes not only communication practices but also the ways individuals construct their social and cultural realities. Digital culture produces shared symbolic realities that transcend geographic boundaries. As Caponnetto et al. [31] indicate, sharing personal moments via social media has become a dominant form of expression among younger generations. These dynamics render digital platforms key spaces where identity performance and social norms are continuously negotiated. In this context, social media functions not merely as a communication tool but as a vehicle for sociocultural transformation. In recent years, it has been defined through various lenses that emphasize its communicative and participatory nature [32]. From Russo et al. [33] emphasis on online collaboration to Kaplan and Haenlein [34] focus on Web 2.0 technologies, differing perspectives converge around themes such as interaction, user-generated content, and networking. Carr and Hayes [35] argue that social media enables "constant, mass, and interpersonal communication." These definitions highlight social media as not just a technological construct but also an ideological tool grounded in user participation and flexibility. Viewed through this theoretical lens, the cultural impact of TikTok becomes clearer. Launched as Douyin in China in 2016 and rebranded as TikTok after acquiring Musical.ly in 2017, the app evolved into a cultural force within just two years [36-38]. Today, TikTok surpasses one billion monthly active users worldwide [39]. According to a 2024 report by Statista, it was the most downloaded mobile application globally, with 825.48 million downloads. This global reach is also visualized in Figure 1 [40].
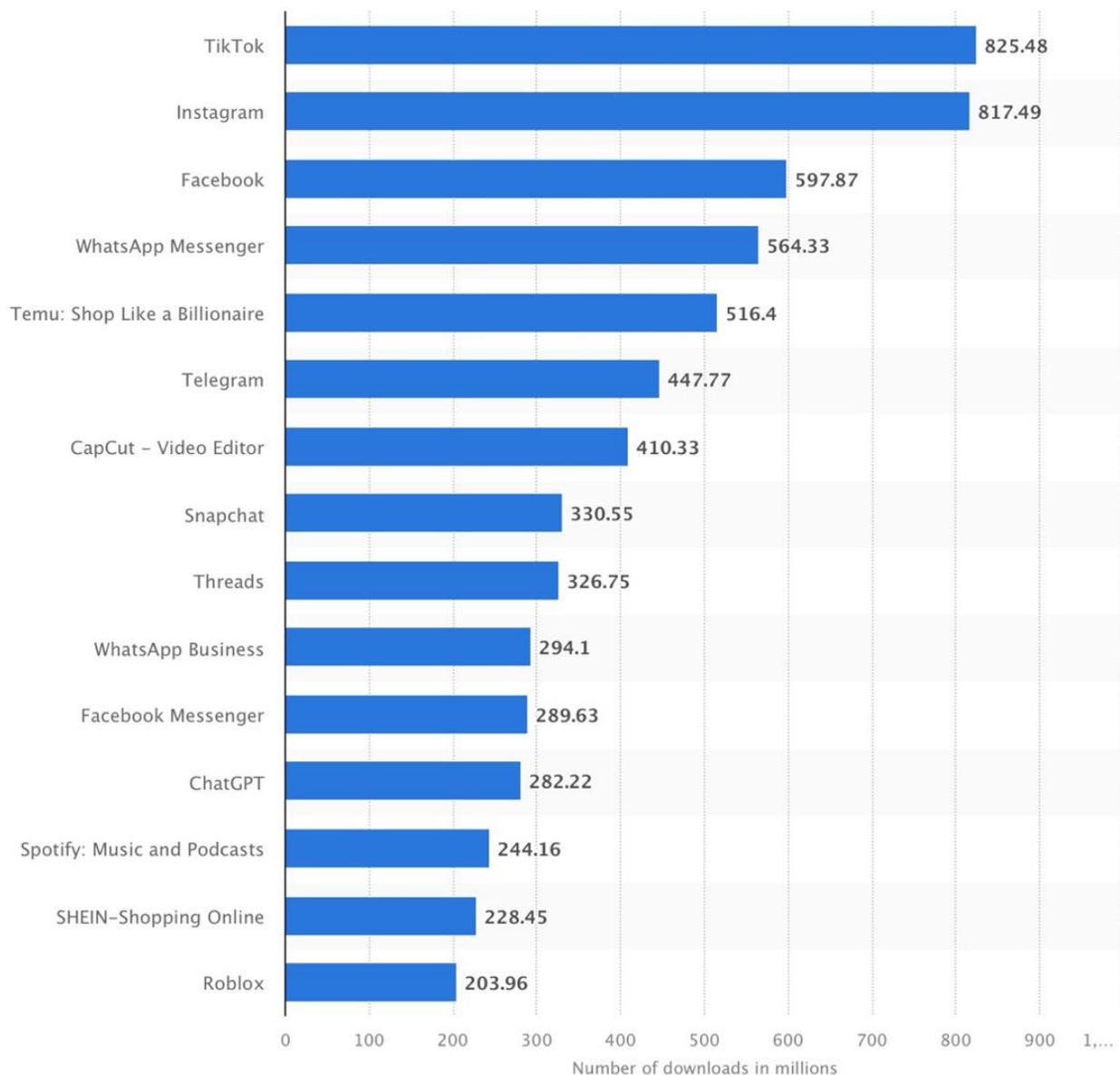
Figure 1.
Most downloaded mobile apps worldwide in 2024 (in millions).
Source: Statista [40].

The platform's global influence is shaped primarily by user demographics and modes of participation in digital culture. Generation Z, often termed "digital natives," grew up immersed in technology [41, 42]. Data shows that this generation constitutes a large share of TikTok's user base [43-45]. In Turkey, social media users aged 16-64 spend an average of 2 hours and 44 minutes per day on platforms. TikTok usage reaches 29 hours and 25 minutes monthly, making it the second most time-consuming platform after Instagram [5].

This high usage is driven by short video formats, algorithm-based visibility, and a wide content range. Typically lasting 15 to 60 seconds, videos foster constant engagement [46, 47]. Users create and edit content using filters, music, and effects, positioning themselves as both consumers and producers [48]. The "For You" algorithm personalizes content streams, offering an inclusive experience [49].

This dual role blurs the traditional consumer/producer divide while creating a sense of community and interactivity.

TikTok also functions as a marketing tool and cultural mirror. Users often replicate viral trends, reproduce aesthetic forms, and engage in content creation for visibility and validation. As Doğan [48]observes, TikTok users reflect everyday life and private spaces, reinforcing the platform's cultural impact. Emotional responses, algorithmic feedback, and performance metrics shape user behavior and reveal the emotional economy of the platform [37].

2. Method and Purpose of the Study

As the second most-used application in Turkey, TikTok offers a unique environment where content producers and consumers often belong to the same demographic, facilitating the reinforcement of patriarchal ideologies and traditional gender roles. The platform's widespread use among Generation Z, who are digitally fluent and highly responsive to online content, makes this cohort particularly relevant for investigating gender perceptions in digital contexts.

This study aims to explore how TikTok users perceive and interpret gender roles within platform content. The sample includes 15 students, aged 17-23, from the Faculty of Communication at Kastamonu University, all members of Generation Z. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their media literacy and analytical competencies, which positioned them to critically engage with gender representations on TikTok [50, 51]. As Creswell and Poth [52] note, qualitative phenomenological research typically involves 5 to 25 participants; the selected sample was chosen for its accessibility, contextual relevance, and capacity to provide in-depth insight.

The study addresses the following research questions:
1. How are gender roles reproduced on TikTok?
2. How do users' existing views on gender influence their interpretation of TikTok content?
3. How do perceptions of gender roles vary by content type on the platform?

Semi-structured interview questions were designed to include dominant cultural stereotypes, e.g., portraying women as "emotional" and men as "brave", to elicit reflective and critical responses. This approach aligns with Braun and Clarke's [53] reflexive thematic analysis framework, which highlights the researcher's active role in constructing meaning through interaction.

In-depth interviews served as the primary method of data collection [54], allowing for open-ended exploration of participants' beliefs, emotions, cultural practices, and experiences [55]. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, online, by phone, or email, recorded with informed consent, and subsequently analyzed thematically.

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method that enables the systematic identification of themes within data [56]. It is often associated with other qualitative approaches such as content analysis, grounded theory, and phenomenology [57, 58].

Braun and Clarke [59] outline three primary forms of thematic analysis:
1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis
2. Code Reliability Thematic Analysis
3. Codebook Thematic Analysis

This study adopted the reflexive thematic analysis approach, which centers on the researcher's critical engagement with the data. Rather than using a predetermined coding framework, this method allows for flexible and dynamic development of codes and themes based on the natural flow and context of the data [59]. It involves the researcher's interpretive reflections and critical questioning throughout the research process, including the interview phase, thematic development, and data analysis. MAXQDA software, a widely used tool in qualitative research, was utilized for the analysis.

2.1. Ethical Approval and Data Collection Process

Ethics Statement: This research was approved by the Akdeniz University Ethics Committee (Decision No: 444, 23.10.2024). Interviews were conducted voluntarily between October 24, 2024, and

November 4, 2024. Participants were coded as P1, P2, and P3 to protect privacy. Data were collected and analyzed in detail through open-ended questions directed at participants.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis Process

Participants responded to 15 semi-structured questions organized under three main categories:
1. Gender Perception: Views on gender roles and inequalities.
2. TikTok Usage Habits: Time spent on the platform, types of content consumed, and perceptions of TikTok.
3. Gender Representations in Content: Interpretations of male and female portrayals in TikTok videos.

The first two categories aimed to uncover participants' pre-existing views on gender and their exposure to TikTok content. The final category sought to link these attitudes to how participants interpreted gender representations on the platform. This structure allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how personal beliefs intersect with digital media content.

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, facilitated by MAXQDA software. Initial analysis involved identifying frequently used terms via word clouds, followed by contextual examination. Through pre-coding, key patterns and concepts were extracted, which were then grouped into sub-themes and overarching themes based on their relational structure. Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained a critical and interpretive stance, focusing on how participants constructed meaning around gender, engaged with platform dynamics, and responded to representational patterns within TikTok content.

The study was based on the following assumptions:
1. Participants possess awareness of gender roles.
2. TikTok content is interpreted through dominant gender norms.
3. Gender representations on TikTok contribute to the reproduction of traditional roles.

3. Findings

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Of the participants interviewed in the study, 8 were female, and 7 were male. Demographic information about the age and gender of the participants is provided in Table 1. The participants' names and surnames were not included in the study, and each participant was coded as P1, P2, or P3 according to the order of the interview.
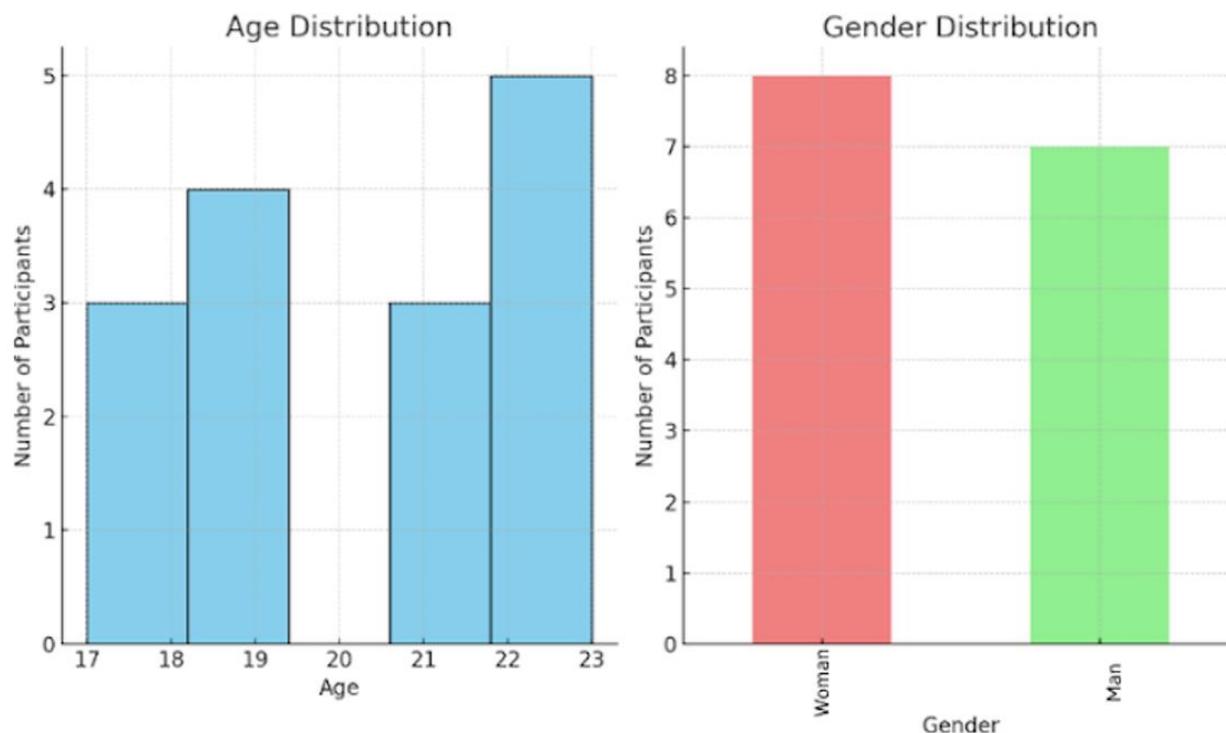
Age Distribution

Gender Distribution

Table 1.
Demographic Information on Participants.

The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 23. Each participant was asked 15 questions under three headings: "Questions on Participants' Perception of Gender Roles," "Questions on Participants' TikTok Usage Habits," and "Questions on TikTok Content and Gender Representations in the Content."

3.2. Thematic Analysis Findings
After the demographic characteristics of the participants were determined, the data obtained from the interviews were evaluated using the thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is an approach that aims to create meaningful themes by identifying recurring patterns in qualitative data [56]. In this study, MAXQDA software was used to systematically code and categorize the data into themes. In the first stage, the most frequently occurring words from the interview transcripts were identified, and word frequencies were visualized. Below is a visualization of the word cloud showing the most frequently used words in the interviews and the concepts that stand out in the thematic analysis:
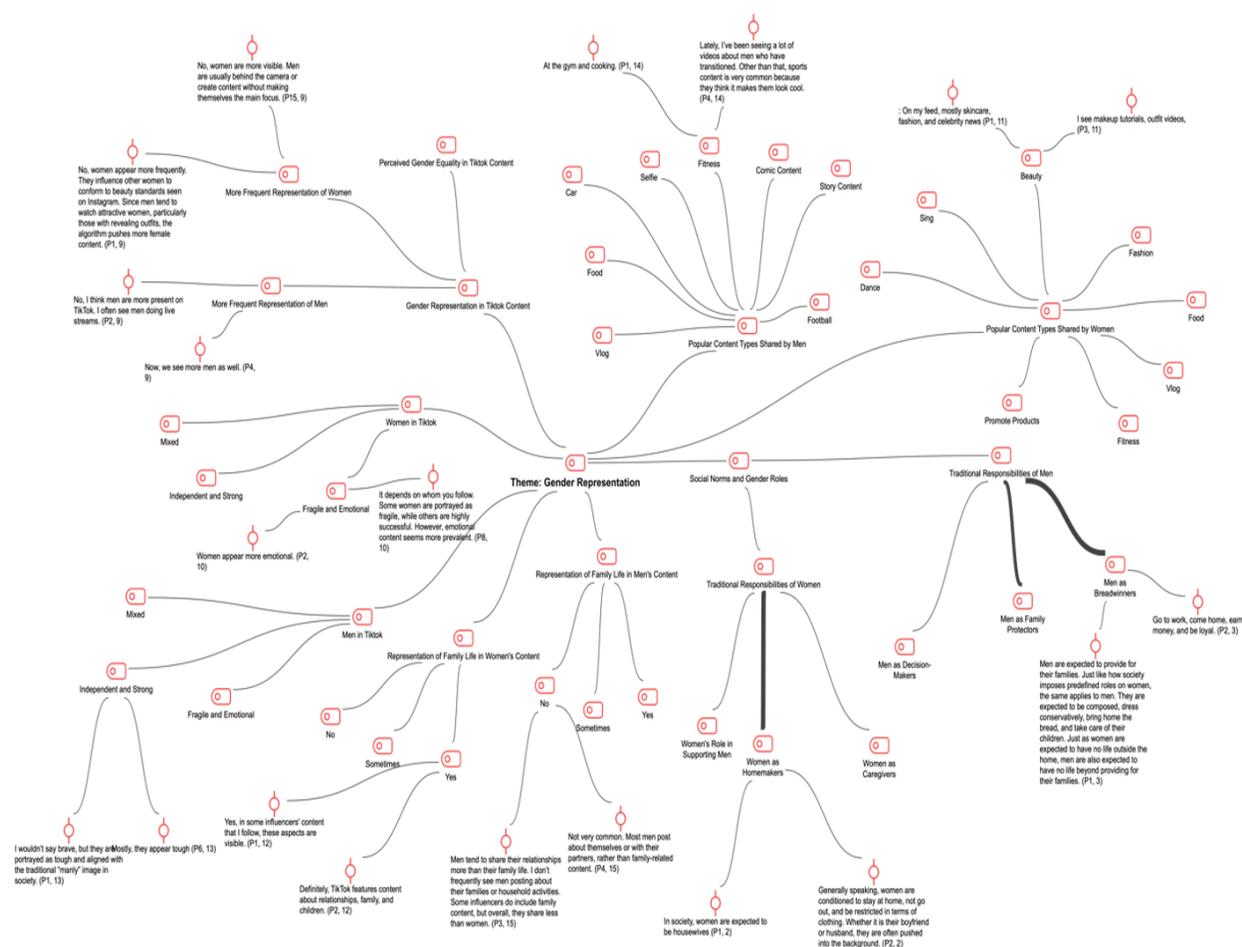
Figure 2.
Word Cloud.

In Figure 2, concepts such as "women," "men," "content," "videos," "TikTok," "society," and "family" that stand out in the word cloud indicate that the study examines the relationship between gender roles, digital media content, and individuals' media consumption practices.

The word cloud was considered an important visualization tool that guided the research before determining the themes and sub-themes of the data. In this process, the interviewees' responses to the questions were deciphered, and codes were first created. Then, sub-themes were determined based on these codes, and in the final stage, the sub-themes were structured under the main themes. As a result, the research was shaped around two main themes: "Gender Representation" and "TikTok Usage and Perspective".

3.3. Gender Representation

This model visualizes the qualitative data analysis process used in research and explains how codes are associated with theoretical themes.

One of the sub-themes aims to reveal their thoughts on the position of women and men in social life. Only one participant (P6) stated that she had no opinion on the question. Two participants (P11, P13) stated that the social positions of women and men vary in terms of equality.

> "P11: I think women are more prominent now. For example, in rural areas, women are further behind. But as we move towards the city, we see equality. I think it depends on the place.
> "P13: It varies. For example, it is more equal in any company position. Of course, there are things like lower salaries for women. However, in the industrial sector, where more wrist strength is required, men are at the forefront. Social equality is better now than in the past."

Figure 3.
Gender Based on the Code Theory Model.

P11 stated that women have started to take a more prominent role in social life, but immediately noted that this situation is subject to change. Additionally, the responses of P11 and P13 considered social structure and working life. Two participants (P12, P15) indicated that both genders are in equal positions. Meanwhile, seven participants included their awareness of gender roles in their comments and stated that men and women hold unequal positions in social life.

On the other hand, 1 participant (P9) stated that both genders experience difficulties and emphasized that women and men are not equal in social life. This shows that the participant was able to have a critical and holistic perspective.

The other sub-theme consists of questions about the tasks awaiting women and men in daily life and society's expectations. With these questions, it was observed that gender roles and stereotypes were frequently mentioned by the participants. For example, domestic care duties and responsibilities toward spouses and children, which are among the gender roles constructed for women, were frequently encountered in the answers. P1, P10, and P13 mentioned the roles that gender roles impose on women but stated that this situation has started to change. P1 stated that society wants women to stay out of the public eye and that the increase in female influencers makes her happy. P10 and P13 stated that women and men should share housework, both genders should participate in working life, and that they have started to do so. Another theme that emerged from the interviews relates to the perception of personal safety as a core responsibility imposed on women. Participants P4 and P8 highlighted that

beyond traditional domestic expectations, women in contemporary Turkish society are compelled to prioritize their own protection due to the pervasive threat of gender-based violence. This perspective reflects a heightened awareness of structural inequalities and the normalization of violence in everyday life.

These responses indicate that participants are not only aware of the stereotypical roles assigned to women but also critically recognize how these roles intersect with societal insecurity and gendered violence. The emphasis on self-protection reveals how gender roles are negotiated under conditions of threat, where women are expected to internalize responsibility for their own safety, thereby reinforcing the structural burden placed on them.

Within the scope of the study, in order to reveal the participants' awareness of gender roles constructed for men, they were asked which tasks are expected of men. It is seen that the participants are aware of gender roles for men. All 15 participants expressed expectations for men to go to work and earn money. It is seen that roles such as being included in the public sphere and earning money were also expressed by the participants. On the other hand, while P5 and P6 stated that education is more important for men, P4 and P13 emphasized masculinity.

> *"P4: Society expects men to go to work, come back from work. But I think they expect men to be more masculine. It seems this way because when you think of a man, you only think of power."*
>
> *"P13: Men are pathetic. Work, don't cry, stand up. With the mentality of raising soldiers, men are born just because masculinity is shouted."*

The other sub-theme consists of the answers given to questions about TikTok content and gender representations in the content. In this sub-theme, it was aimed for participants to evaluate and interpret TikTok content and gender representations together. Eight questions were asked under this category. The first of these questions aims to reveal whether the content encountered on TikTok resembles daily life and the women and men encountered in daily life. Thirteen participants stated that the content published on TikTok does not resemble daily life and that people behave differently from their real identities on social media platforms, specifically on TikTok. At the same time, in the answers given, perceptions of beauty and handsomeness were mentioned from time to time, and it was stated by the participants that they differed from daily life both physically and behaviorally, with analogies such as masks and filters. On the other hand, one participant (P2) stated that there is a similarity between daily life and TikTok content and that it reflects the problems in daily life, while one participant (P9) stated that it changes depending on which way the content is viewed.

Participants were asked whether they encountered the content of male and female content producers equally. It was observed that participants could evaluate the encounter rate based on the number of views. While one participant (P2) stated they encountered male content producers more, three participants (P4, P8, P13) said they encountered male and female content producers equally. Ten participants reported encountering female creators' content more often. When explaining why they encountered female content more, it was often emphasized that these creators occasionally display their bodies, seek attention, and produce content they prefer. For example, P1 stated that women are watched more because of their clothing style.

> *"P7: Women's videos are more visible. I think women are now objectified."*
>
> *"P9: Women are watched more. They also have certain reasons, probably in terms of appearance. Women dress revealingly, or they broadcast live, they earn money."*

On the other hand, P5, who stated that women content producers are more visible, said that women are more visible through efforts to express themselves and make themselves heard.

> *"P5: I see women trying to save themselves more. This is probably due to the recent Iqbal[1] incidents. We see them trying to create a perception about femicides. Men are also involved in this, which I think is good. I think women are more visible in this period."*

Under the category, questions were asked to understand whether the content produced by women reproduces gender representations and the views of the participants on this issue. One of these questions is "Are women fragile, emotional, and romantic in the content you watch on TikTok? Or are they free,

hardworking, and successful?" In this question, it was assumed that the participants would give answers for the first option. However, the answers did not match the assumption. Three participants (P1, P2, P13) stated that women are generally seen as fragile, emotional, and romantic in the content, while three participants (P9, P10, P11) stated that women are seen as free, hardworking, and successful. Nine participants stated that this representation can vary depending on the person who produces and follows the trend, and the individual circumstances of the person. Considering the answers given by the participants in the first three questions, it is seen that the participants are aware of gender roles and can evaluate gender representations in social media content in this context.

> *"P3: I think it's something that changes from period to period. It changes from movement to movement. Sometimes there is such a trend that we are very strong, we are great, we are hardworking, we commute to work, we commute to school. We share this. These current ends and then the current start again. We get cheated, we get sad, we get hurt. I think it's something that changes from period to period."*
>
> *"P4: I have both. Both can be seen in one woman. Only one can be seen in one woman, and only one can be seen in the other."*
>
> *"P6: It is almost the same on both sides. They can be both fragile and free."*
>
> *"P7: I can say both; it depends on the character of the person."*
>
> *"P8: It depends on the person you follow. There are fragile people and people who are seen as very successful. But the emotional part seems to be more."*

The same question was also asked of male content producers. Considering the gender roles that society has created for men, they were asked, "Are men tough, brave, and adventurous in the content you watch on TikTok? Or are they emotional and romantic?" Seven participants stated that male content producers were seen as tough, brave, and adventurous in their content, while four participants (P5, P7, P9, P11) stated that they were emotional and romantic. On the other hand, four participants (P2, P3, P4, P10) stated that these representations vary depending on the person, trend, and content. In the question about female content creators, the views of the participants were less likely to be associated with the reproduction of gender roles. The view that female content creators have multifaceted representations and that these representations vary is dominant. However, this was not the case for male content creators. The views that the posts of male creators align with gender roles are dominant. Only four participants (P2, P3, P4, P10) stated that the representations in the content vary. Participants P1 and P13 interpreted the representations of gender roles in the content of both women and men according to dominant gender roles. P3 and P4 stated that the representations in the content of both women and men vary according to the person and trend, while P9 stated that opposite roles are represented for both genders. It was observed that the answers of other participants did not reflect similar views for both genders.

> *"P3: It changes from time to time. It depends on the trend on TikTok. At that moment, a trend is spreading a lot; everyone is doing it, they are very powerful."*
>
> *"P4: Again, it varies from person to person. We see both."*
>
> *"P8: Tough, brave, and adventurous. I think they look very rascal. We can also see people who humiliate women a lot. I can also say this for homosexuals. There are also a lot of people who insult homosexuals. I don't think they are like themselves. They show the face they want to show."*

3.4. TikTok Usage and Perspective

The second main theme aims to comprehensively address TikTok usage practices and perceptions of the platform. In this context, usage habits such as how often and for what purposes individuals use TikTok, the time they spend on the platform, and their tendencies regarding content preferences are examined. Additionally, the effects of TikTok on individuals, users' attitudes towards the platform, and TikTok's position in the social and cultural context are also analyzed.
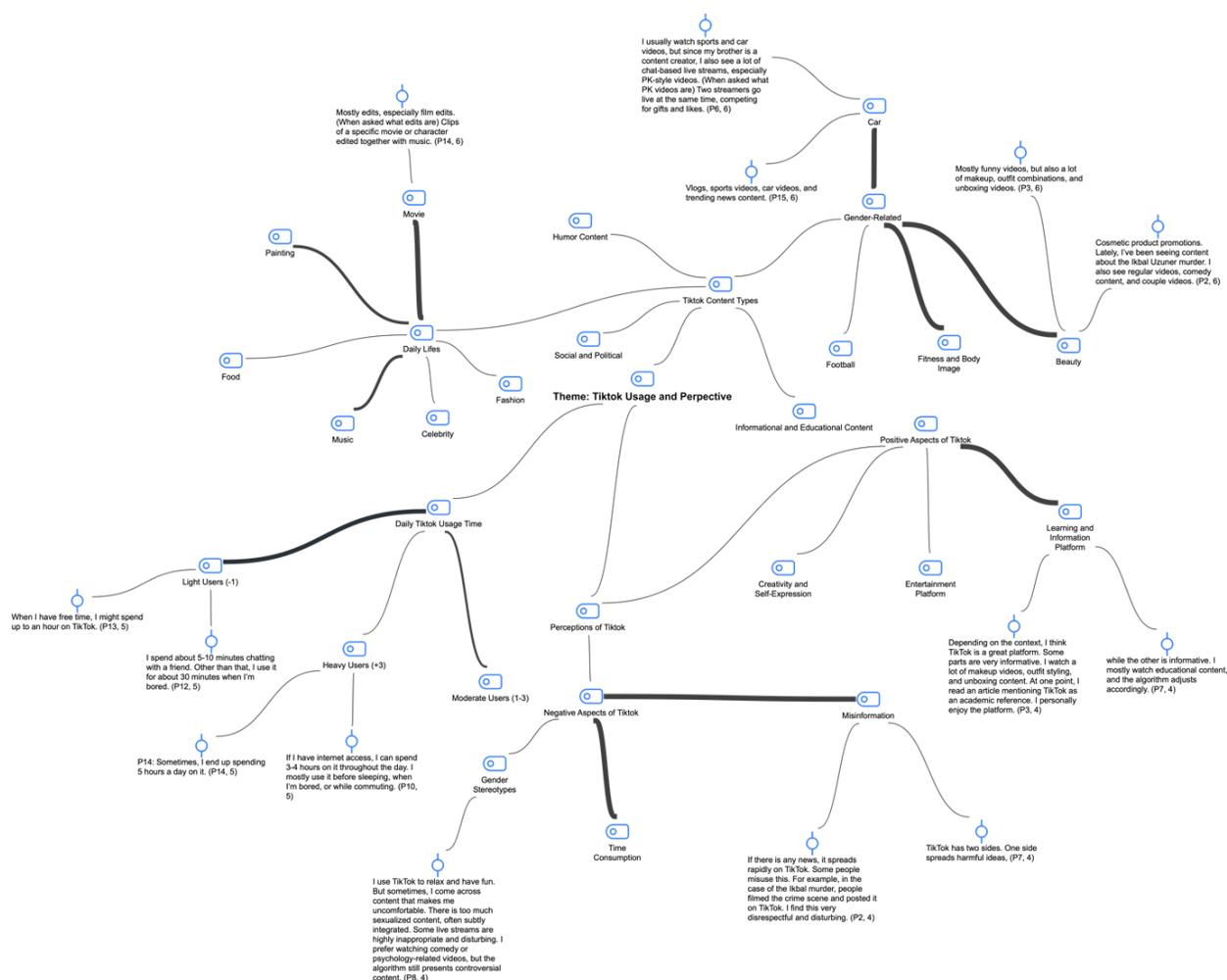
Figure 4.
TikTok Usage and Perspective Based on Code Theory Model.

In the category of questions about TikTok usage habits, the participants were first asked the question "What kind of application do you think TikTok is?" This question aimed to reveal how they evaluate the TikTok platform. Nine participants emphasized the purpose of using TikTok, viewing activities, and the algorithm created by the application accordingly, interpreting TikTok based on these purposes and activities. Participants stated that TikTok can be good or bad for these reasons. Five participants emphasized that TikTok is harmful and stated that sexuality, nudity, and dressing styles are obscene. Only one participant (P3) clearly stated that she liked using the application.

When asked about the average amount of time participants spend on TikTok, 8 participants said it was between 30 minutes and 1 hour, while 7 participants said it was between 2 hours and more than 2 hours. Participants also frequently stated that the time spent was not the same every day.

Again, the last two questions in the second category aim to determine which content the participant encounters most and prefers to watch. Four participants (P1, P2, P3, P4) also mentioned the TikTok algorithm in this question. Participants are familiar with how the platform they use functions. The answers regarding the most common type of content and the most favorite types to watch often overlap.

> "P1: There is an algorithm in TikTok just like Instagram. Generally, whoever you follow, whose pages you look at, that's what comes out."
> "P3: We see what we watch the most."

"P4: It depends on liking TikTok; what you like appears on your page more."

It can be seen that content is not only limited to user-generated representations, but also that TikTok's algorithms shape these representations. For example, when a user watches more makeup and beauty videos, the platform suggests more such content, which can lead to gender reinforcement.

Two different questions were asked about the types of content that female and male creators share the most. Eight participants stated that female creators frequently share videos with makeup, clothing combinations, product promotion, and skincare content. Three participants stated that they share vlog content about their daily life. Three participants also mentioned that female creators shoot videos by dancing to highlight their bodies. Additionally, two participants indicated that singing, food, and sports content are shared most often. The most common expressions of behaviors, such as applying makeup, choosing clothes, and skincare, seen as behaviors specific to women reinforces gender role representations. Criteria such as looking beautiful and well-groomed, which are obligatory for women, are part of these gender roles. Conversely, dance videos that showcase the female body in the foreground also reflect this perspective. Regarding male content producers, the most common answer was content related to the gym, sports branches, and football, with six participants mentioning this. The next most frequent content type was role-playing, with four participants. Two participants stated that male content producers share videos related to automobiles. Other responses include selfies, videos of daily activities or workplaces, and videos of breaking rules. The participant (P13) who answered "videos of the rajon cutting[1]" explained it with the mafia series named *"Valley of the Wolves[2]"*.

"P13: Especially in our country, the most popular videos are on racon cutting and bodybuilding. (The videos on racon cutting were requested.) People who say that if we do this, this will happen have watched too much of Valley of the Wolves and reflect this in real life."

The participants' responses to the posts of male content producers align with traditional male gender roles. According to these roles, men are expected to be strong, brave, emotionally reserved, active in the public sphere, and engaged in employment. It was noted that male content producers create content consistent with these stereotypes. These responses partially overlap with answers to the question, "Are men tough, brave, and adventurous in the content you watch on TikTok? Or are they emotional and romantic?" Seven participants selected "tough, brave, and adventurous," aligning with the content produced by men, while four chose "emotional and romantic." Additionally, four participants stated that representations vary depending on the individual, trend, and content, but these variations were not observed in the posts. Similarly, ten participants answered "no" to the question, "Are family life, romantic relationships, and children seen in the content shared by men on TikTok?" Five participants indicated that only their lovers are depicted. The reason for only showing lovers and not family life or children may relate to the study's target group. Conversely, when asked if family life, romantic relationships, and children are seen in women's content, ten participants responded "yes." Three participants said that sometimes lovers or family are shown, or it depends on the individual, and one stated that only women's lovers are depicted. Only one participant answered "no." This suggests that gender roles are reproduced in the posts of female content producers. Based on the responses, while emotional and romantic themes are not reflected in men's posts, themes of independence, hard work, and success are not evident in women's posts.

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[1]According to the Turkish Language Association, the expression "racon kesmek" refers to making a show of oneself or posturing [60]. Unique to Turkish colloquial usage, this phrase is closely associated with displays of masculinity and power, and is particularly prominent in mafia-themed television series (e.g., *Valley of the Wolves*) where it is coded as part of the performative language of "being a man."

[2]The television series Valley of the Wolves (Kurtlar Vadisi) has frequently been examined in international academic literature, particularly within the context of Turkish nationalism, masculinity representations, and the relationship between popular culture and politics in Turkey. First aired in 2003, the series focuses on an agent named Polat Alemdar who infiltrates the mafia, and it stands out for its exploration of themes such as power, loyalty, betrayal, and justice. The show has been regarded not merely as a television product but also as a reflection of Turkey's political and social atmosphere. [61] . analyzes the series through the narrative of a "paramilitary hero," examining it as a representation of the synthesis between Turkish nationalism and Islamic identity. In this context, the series is analyzed as a medium through which . on the other hand, discusses how anti-American rhetoric is masculinity constructs and national identity formation are reproduced. [62] constructed through the film adaptation, Valley of the Wolves: Iraq, and the impact of these representations on US-Turkey relations. These studies reveal that the series transcends popular culture, engaging with international political discourses as well.
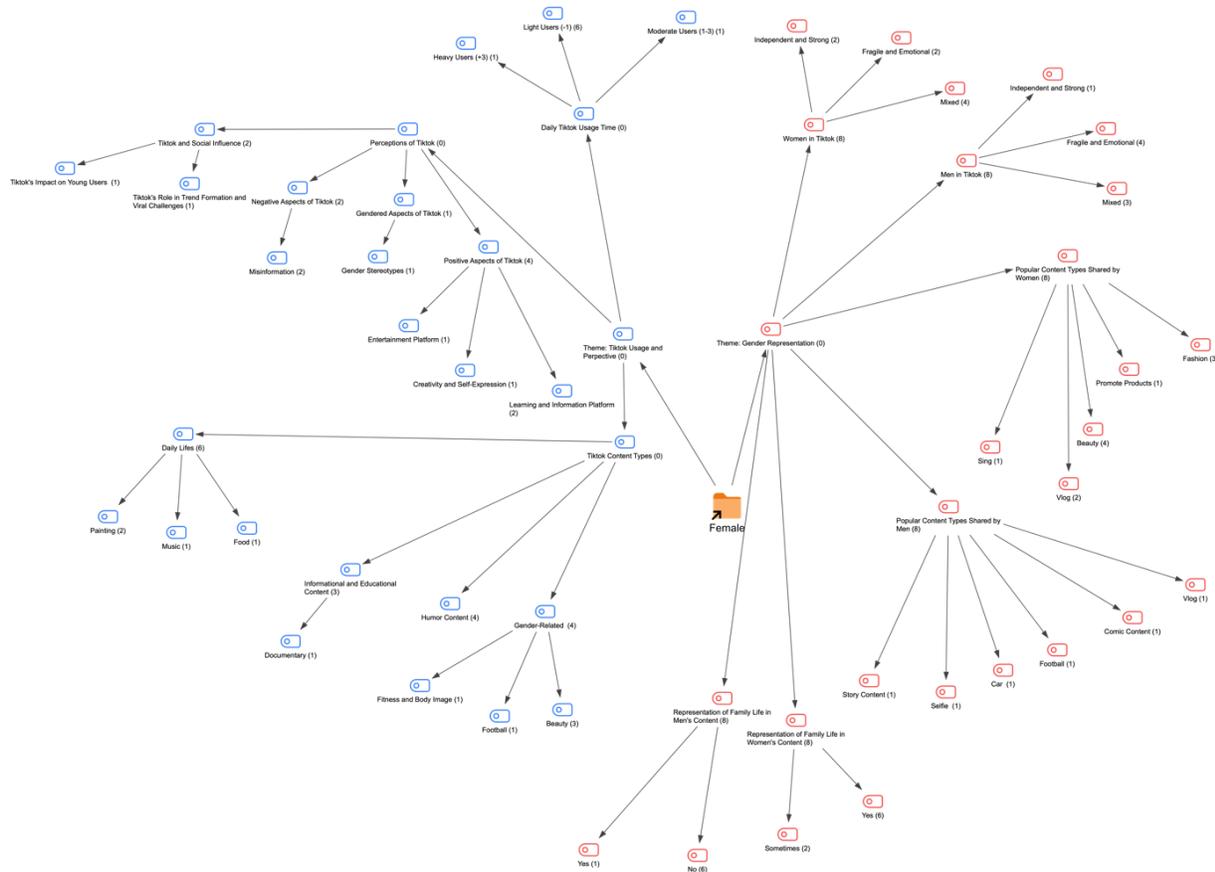
Figure 5.
Women's Single Case Modeled Codes.

In this visualization, the two main themes and sub-themes identified in line with women's views are presented in a hierarchical structure within the framework of the frequencies of the codes. This thematic analysis aims to understand women's experiences, perceptions, and attitudes in depth and shows how each sub-theme is shaped within a specific context, supported by codes.
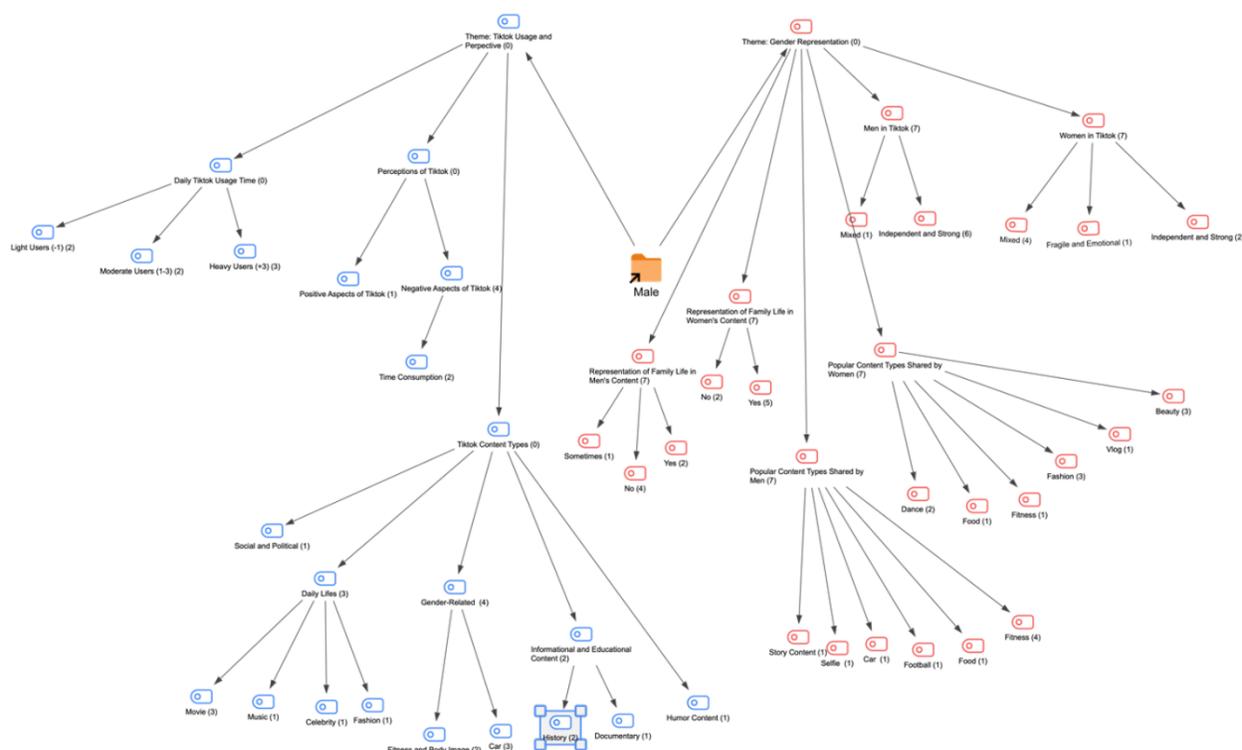
Figure 6.
Men's Codes with Single Case Model.

In this visualization, the two main themes and sub-themes, structured in line with men's views, are presented hierarchically based on code frequencies. This thematic analysis aims to comprehensively examine men's experiences, perceptions, and attitudes, with each sub-theme made meaningful by supporting it with specific codes.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how university students (aged 17-23) perceive gender roles, stereotypes, and their representations on TikTok, based on the assumption that users' existing gender perceptions influence their interpretation of content. The findings confirmed that participants possess a strong awareness of gender roles; responses frequently referenced the traditional private/public sphere distinction, women as caregivers and men as providers. Some participants acknowledged the evolving roles of women, indicating a nuanced understanding of social changes and the media's impact on gender perceptions among younger generations. The finding that TikTok trends can rapidly alter gender representations underscores the role of social media in reconstructing these portrayals. Given the media's powerful role in learning and disseminating gender roles, participants' awareness facilitates critical discussions on how norms are shaped and perceived online. The diversity of TikTok content demonstrates that gender roles are reproduced through various media forms.

Participants noted that TikTok content differs from everyday life. A common finding was that women are the most active content creators and that their body-focused content often receives high viewership, sometimes negatively interpreted as attention-seeking. Although female representations were not always perceived as fragile or emotional and showed potential for development, the content generally reflected dominant cultural ideologies: associating women with physical appearance and men with strength and courage. Women's content often centered on makeup, clothing, and shopping, whereas male creators were frequently portrayed as tough, brave, and adventurous, sharing content

related to cars, gyms, sports, and football. Despite recognizing diverse representational potentials, participants consistently criticized the content for reinforcing traditional roles. This awareness is crucial for understanding how existing views shape perceptions of gender representations on TikTok.

Moreover, most participants were aware of TikTok's algorithm and evaluated the platform as either beneficial or harmful depending on usage goals. They observed that users follow popular trends to gain followers and post similar videos reflecting their daily lives. While content was seen as aligning with perceived gender roles, findings indicate that TikTok both reproduces existing representations and allows for their evolution and the emergence of alternative perceptions over time. The platform's user-centric nature and algorithmic influence are decisive in the dynamic shaping of these norms. Participants' algorithmic awareness helped elucidate how perceptions vary according to content type, often aligning with dichotomies such as strong/powerful versus emotional/vulnerable.

This study is significant for investigating gender roles on TikTok, a popular user-driven digital platform. It highlights the dual potential of the platform to both reproduce and transform gender roles through user-generated content, enriching the literature by analyzing social media as a critical site for normative maintenance and change. However, the study is limited in participant number and population scope; future research could expand the sample size through in-depth interviews with more university students representing the younger generation. Ultimately, this research offers an important framework for future studies on the relationship between digital media and gender by analyzing how gender roles are reproduced on digital platforms like TikTok.

Institutional Review Board Statement:
This research was approved by the Akdeniz University Ethics Committee (Decision No: 444, 23.10.2024). Interviews were conducted voluntarily between October 24, 2024, and November 4, 2024.

Transparency:
The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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