Research on the Effect of Social Media Implementations for Improved Customer Relations and Services

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Gelişmiş Müşteri İlişkileri ve Hizmetleri İçin Sosyal Medya Uygulamalarının Etkisinin Araştırılması

Öz

Bu çalışmanın temel motivasyonu, sosyal medya kullanımındaki artış ve bu artışın ana nedenlerini incelemektir. Bu doğrultuda, sosyal medya uygulamalarının (SMU) müşteri ilişkileri ve hizmetleri üzerindeki etkileri ele alınmıştır. Ampirik analiz için Türkiye'de faaliyet gösteren 195 firmadan toplanan veriler, regresyon analizi kullanılarak değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, Sosyal Medya Kullanımının (SMK) müşteri ilişkileri ve hizmetleri açısından önemli bir unsur olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca, SMU'nun müşteri ilişkilerini iyileştirici bir etkisi olduğu ve firmaların uyguladığı müşteri etkileşimi inisiyatifleri (MEİ) ile sosyal medya stratejilerinin (SMS), gelişmiş müşteri ilişkileri ve hizmetleri (GMİH) ile güçlü bir bağlantıya sahip olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu araştırmanın, sosyal medya kullanımının firma düzeyindeki etkilerini analiz ederek literatüre katkı sağlaması beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Firmaların Sosyal Medya Kullanımı, Müşteri Hizmetleri ve Servisi, Sosyal Medya Uygulamaları

Makale Türü: Araştırma Makalesi

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Abstract

The primary motivation of this study is to examine the increase in social media usage and the primary reasons behind it. The effects of social media implementations (SMI) on customer relations and services have been investigated in this context. Data were collected from 195 firms operating in Turkey and analyzed using regression analysis. The findings revealed that Social Media Usage (SMU) is essential to customer relations and services. Additionally, it was found that SMIs have a positive impact on improving customer relationships and that the customer engagement initiatives (CEI) and social media strategies (SMS) implemented by firms are strongly associated with improved customer relations and services (ICRS). This research is expected to contribute to the literature by analyzing the effects of social media usage at the firm level.

Keywords: Social Media Usage of Firms, Customer Relations and Services, Social Media Implementations

Paper Type: Research Article

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1. Introduction

Email first paved the way for the introduction of social media (SM) in 1971. Subsequently, applications in which individuals participated in sharing began to emerge and continued to accelerate with the establishment of Facebook in 2004. According to a report compiled at the beginning of 2024, 62.3% of the global population uses SM. Over the past year, 266 million new social media users have been added, with the average user spending 2 hours and 23 minutes on these platforms daily (Smartsights, 2024). Considering the time spent on the internet in Türkiye in 2023, it is 7 hours and 24 minutes daily. While % 83.4 of the Turkish people are internet users, % of mobile connection users are %95.4 of the total population and % 73.1active users (Sare, 2024). SM platforms have become environments where individuals obtain daily news and express their feelings and ideas. SM, which facilitates communication with text, images, videos, and live links, attracts new users each year. It is a valuable resource not only for individuals but also for companies. Remarkably, social media investment of companies has increased in recent years. For instance, by the end of 2022, SM video ad expenditure is anticipated to rise by 20.1% to 24.35 billion dollars, while annual advertising spending is anticipated to reach 134 billion dollars, an increase of over 17% compared to the previous year (Hootsuite, 2022). Consumers are six times more likely to purchase from an SM product page with photos, and influencers base their purchases on 37% of product recommendations and 7% of celebrity recommendations, according to research on consumer purchasing behaviour (Sproutsocial, 2022). It is well known that firms are facing the relentless rise of SM, and consumer-oriented firms are paying more and more attention to SM due to its interactive, user-generated content-focused characteristics (Ananda et al., 2016).

SM is radically altering how we communicate, consume, create, and collaborate. For businesses, it is an undeniable fact that information and communication technology (ICT) has one of the most revolutionary impacts on both their internal and external operations (Aral et al., 2013). According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), the functions of SM are existence, relationship, sharing, identity creation, conversation, and reputation building. They also emphasize that corporate communication has been democratized, noting that individuals and communities now hold power because they create, share, and consume content.

Regardless of size, firms can utilize social media (SM) to generate value and improve their commercial activities (Braojos-Gomez et al., 2015). Social media can be employed for a variety of purposes, including marketing initiatives, talent acquisition, conducting research, product or service testing and reviews, as well as feedback, notifications, and complaint management (Chung et al., 2017). Additionally, it can be used for customer relationship management (CRM), new product development, innovation management, and brand management (Foltean et al., 2019).

Previous research has explored the relationship between social media (SM) technologies and customer relations. Reinhold and Alt (2012) investigated the use of SM in CRM processes and their functional needs. Trainor et al. (2014) examined the correlation between the implementation of SM technologies by firms, social customer relationship management, and customer relationship performance. Maecker et al. (2016) examined the role of SM interactions in customer relationship management. Foltean et al. (2019) investigated CRM capabilities as a moderating factor when analyzing the impact of SM use on firm performance. In addition to existing literature, the present study examines the link between specific social media implementations (SMIs) (active presence (AP), customer engagement initiatives (CEI), social media analytics (SMA), and social media strategy (SMS)) and customer relations and services. While previous research largely viewed SM as a tool, this study explores the relationship between SM usage (SMU) and its specific implementations. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between SMI and improved customer relations and services (ICRS). First, the theoretical relationship between SM and customer relations was investigated, and

then a conceptual model for analyzing these relationships was proposed. Data gathered from firms in Türkiye were analyzed according to the study's conceptual model.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social media usage for building improved customer relations and services

SM is a powerful tool that can be utilized to manage customer relations and bring them closer to the firms (Elena, 2016). Today's customers do not passively wait for firms to send them various messages; instead, they actively engage with firms and seek to play a role in customer relationship management. SM platforms facilitate two-way communication between customers and firms. These environments assist firms in understanding their consumers' needs and facilitate communication that enables them to respond proactively to these needs (Parveen et al., 2016).

Conventional customer relationship management models fall short in fostering long-term relationships, while social media offers a more dynamic and interactive solution (Zhou et al., 2023). Social media provides powerful and highly effective tools for firms and customers (Al-Dwairi et al., 2024). The stronger the emotional and social connections a company establishes and sustains between its customers and its brands, the closer and more robust its relationship with those customers will become.

SM facilitates these benefits by enhancing customer engagement, playing a crucial role in communication, and managing relationships (Alalwan et al., 2017). Effective SM communication management allows firms to achieve their targeted results. According to Maecker et al. (2016), customers who engage with the company on SM are ultimately more profitable. Consumers can share their post-purchase opinions or product usage on SM. If the relationships with these shares are well-managed, firms can increase their visibility to potential customers, creating an ideal environment for acquiring new customers (Maecker et al., 2016).

Prior studies have demonstrated the potential significance of firms' SM use in customer relations: Kim and Ko (2010) investigated the effect of SM on intimacy and trust in customer relations; Choudhury and Harrigan (2014) evaluated the influence of SM technology on customer relationship management; Sasatanun and Charoensukmongkol (2016) examined entrepreneurs' use of SM for customer connections and analyzed aspects such as cost reduction and market expansion; Alavi (2016) assessed the importance of SM platforms in developing customer connections; Wang and Kim (2017) studied the influence of SM use on the relationship between new CRM capabilities and job performance; Kantorová and Bachmann (2018) evaluated social customer relationship management systems and consumer information, integration, and utilization based on SM; Guha et al. (2018) surveyed business managers to understand how they benefited from SM in customer relations; Dewnarain et al. (2019) examined the impact of SM technology on customer relationship management; Foltean et al. (2019) explored the association between SM technology usage and customer relationship management competencies; Gashi and Ahmeti (2021) analyzed the importance of social media in developing enterprises within customer relations; Cao and Weerawardena (2023), stated that market orientation using SM is an essential part of market-sensing capability, and it improves customer relationship management and causes more excellent marketing performance. Shah et al. (2024) found that SM usage is positively related to customer relations.

The current study further investigates the effect of SM on customer relations. It seeks to contribute to the literature by examining this relationship through SM applications and behaviors, building upon prior research.

2.2. Social media implementation

Tafesse and Wien (2018) discussed SMI as a synchronized organizational process in which firms use SM to steer their strategic marketing initiatives. These elements, which also impact the firms' SM performance, are examined in terms of their practical applicability. Firms apply theoretical and practical SMI to fully benefit from SM. The current study tries to give a distinct strategy by focusing on customer relations from this perspective, and according to Tafesse and Wien's (2018) research, AP, CEI, SMS, and SMA are discussed.

2.2.1. Active presence

Active presence refers to the communication and engagement between firms and their customers through the creation of content on SM using images, texts, photos, videos, and other visuals. Once a company decides to use SM for business, it is essential to generate content and strive remain active on platforms where customers frequently engage (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The structure of SM platforms enables both firms and consumers to create content and respond to one another's content through features such as comments and likes. Effective content also affects consumers' engagement efforts (Dolan et al., 2019). In addition to fostering a more dynamic relationship with their consumers, the fact that corporations actively create material that appeals to them also makes their relationships with them more dynamic. Based on these factors, it is claimed that a firm's involvement in SM has a positive relationship with the communication they establish with customers and the quality of service they provide.

H1a: The use of social media for customer relations affects active presence.

2.2.2. Customer engagement initiatives

Since the early 2000s, marketers have attempted to develop better customer relations by emphasizing their service. They have come to realize that building emotional connections with consumers will make them more valuable for a lifetime. To achieve this objective, they have focused on personalizing communication and encouraging customers to build relationships with the firm (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Vivek et al. (2012) defined customer engagement as an individual's level of involvement and engagement with a company's product or organizational activities (p.133). The use of SM by consumers is tied to their experiences (Brodie et al., 2013). Providing engaging experiences through collecting relevant and vital data on online platforms is crucial to increasing consumer engagement (Dessart et al., 2016). In an SM ecosystem, the information and experiences that firms provide on SM platforms are the primary sources of consumer engagement (Tafesse and Wien, 2018). Therefore, it is assumed that organizations' efforts to encourage customer engagement are favorably associated with the communication they build with customers and the service they deliver.

H_{1b}: The use of social media for customer relations affects consumer engagement initiative.

2.2.3. Social media strategy

Several industries are greatly affected by the use of SM for marketing and communication (Capitello et al., 2014). SM has become the dominant strategy in digital marketing campaigns due to the fact that it has become a vital component of customers' online activity (Jami Pour et al., 2021). SM can be defined as a communication technology that enables social actors to communicate via bilateral ties (Peters et al., 2013). This system is a subset of strategic decision-making, especially a collection of digitally based information systems (Effing and Spil, 2016), and it is increasingly gaining prominence as a component of enterprises' strategy portfolios (Li. et al., 2021). A well-planned and implemented SM strategy is believed to positively affect communication and customer service.

H_{1c}: The use of social media for customer relations affects social media strategy.

2.2.4. Social media analytics

Consumers leave digital footprints on SM platforms. These footprints result in the accumulation of large volumes of data on SM platforms (Akın Gürsoy Şimşek, 2018). SMA is the field that analyses SM data (Stieglitz et al., 2018). On SM platforms, the data to be analyzed consists of digital interactions that organizations must monitor, store, and analyze, such as reactions to company content, consumer messages, page visits, and shares. By transforming the data obtained through SMA into actionable insights, firms can unlock opportunities in sales, marketing communication, pricing, customer communication (Sabuncu and Atmis, 2020), advertising, public relations, customer relationship management (CRM), and business intelligence (BI) (Stieglitz et al., 2014). It is assumed that SMA has a positive relationship with the communication between firms and their customers.

H_{1d}: The use of social media for customer relations affects social media analytics.

In accordance with the current study aims, the following research hypotheses were generated based on existing literature;

H_2: The use of social media for customer relations affects improved customer relations and services

H_3: Social media implementations affect improved customer relations and services.

H_{3a}: Active presence affects improved customer relations and services.

H_{3b}: Customer engagement affects improved customer relations and services.

H_{3c}: Social media strategy affects improved customer relations and services.

H_{3d}: Social media analytics affects improved customer relations and services.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model developed in response to the literature review and hypotheses. SMI is affected by the usage of SM for customer relations. This variable is also anticipated to affect the enhancement of customer relations and services. In addition, it is anticipated that the theoretical and practical applications of enterprises in SM will be linked to the development of customer services.
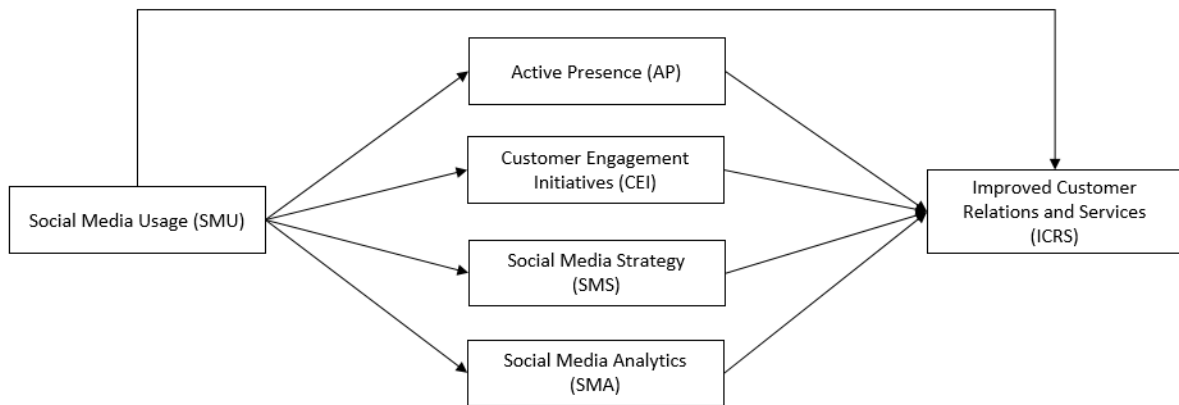
Figure 1. Conceptual Model of This Study

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Analysis

To obtain empirical data, a questionnaire was constructed based on the literature. Survey is constituted by five-point Likert-type closed items in the survey, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." Additionally, the survey includes questions such as company size and year of SM use, from which we can collect information about the companies. The SMU scale (has 6 expressions) for customer relations was adapted from Tajudeen et al. (2018). The sub-dimensions of SMI (AP (has 3 expressions), CEI (has 4 expressions), SMS (has 4 expressions), and SMA (has 5 expressions), were adopted from Tafesse and Wien (2018). The scale for ICRS (has 3 expressions) was also derived from Tajudeen et al. (2018). The scale items, initially written in English, were first translated into Turkish and then back into English to avoid any loss of meaning. Before the pilot study, a group of experts, including academics and private sector professionals, reviewed the questionnaire.

A pilot study was conducted after confirming the appropriateness of the questionnaire expression. The questionnaire was distributed to the companies reached via social media, followed by interviews with all participants. After the findings of the pilot study were evaluated and deemed appropriate and sufficient based on the relevant literature, the full distribution of the questionnaire began. Ethics committee permission was obtained before distributing the survey (Tekirdağ Namık Kemal University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board, 2024-04-02, T2024-1948).

The data were collected through an online survey conducted in April and May. A questionnaire was sent to 3,000 firms via social media (SM) by convenience sampling method; however, only 195 responses were received. Table 1 presents data from the firms that participated in the survey.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

	N	%		N	%
Local	52	26.7	B2B Market	29	14.9
National	59	30.3	B2C	67	34.4
International	84	43.1	B2B&B2C	99	50.8
Dealer	4	2.1	0-10 Employees	67	34.4
Branch office	5	2.6	11-50 Employees	44	22.6
Private Enterprise	177	90.8	51-250 Employees	34	17.4
Public Enterprise	9	4.6	251 + Employees	50	25.6
			Total 195		

According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), a skewness and kurtosis coefficient ranging from -1.5 to +1.5 is considered to be a normal distribution. Table 2 contains the outcomes of the analysis. Examining the results of the normal distribution test reveals that, according to the literature, the skewness and kurtosis value intervals conform to the normal distribution.

Table 2. Normality test results

	Mean	**Std. Deviation**	**Skewness**	**Kurtosis**
SMU	4.1103	0.77064	-0.685	-0.116
AP	4.1726	0.87628	-1.231	1.040
CEI	3.9910	0.83511	-0.737	0.033
SMS	3.8897	0.82917	-0.746	0.517
SMA	3.8267	0.96394	-0.613	-0.328
ICRS	3.9265	0.80645	-0.522	0.116

The study revealed that the KMO values of the scales were greater than 0.50. A result of less than 0.05 for the Bartlett sphericity test suggests a suitable level of interaction. The results of an explanatory factor analysis indicate that research scales are appropriate for analysis (Durmuş et al., 2016). All statements were used because there were no items with a KMO value below 0.05. Table 3 provides the results.

Table 3. Exploratory factor and reliability analysis

Factor	**Items**	**Loadings**	**KMO**	**k²**	**df**	**p**	**Variance %**	**α**
SMU	SMU1	0.882	0.895	746.66	15	0.000	69.725	0.911
	SMU2	0.870						
	SMU3	0.856						
	SMU4	0.819						
	SMU5	0.742						
	SMU6	0.834						
AP	AP1	0.935	0.718	343.885	3	0.000	81.786	0.888
	AP2	0.899						
	AP3	0.879						
CEI	CEI1	0.913	0.760	368.311	6	0.000	68.328	0.837
	CEI2	0.875						
	CEI3	0.742						
	CEI4	0.763						
SMS	SMS1	0.855	0.831	455.608	6	0.000	75.833	0.890
	SMS2	0.893						
	SMS3	0.836						
	SMS4	0.893						
SMA	SMA1	0.912	0.860	908.828	10	0.000	80.671	0.940
	SMA2	0.921						
	SMA3	0.889						
	SMA4	0.912						
	SMA5	0.855						
ICRS	ICRS1	0.888	0.705	317.807	3	0.000	80.187	0.871
	ICRS2	0.866						
	ICRS3	0.932						

Before evaluating the research hypotheses, the common method variance between variables was investigated. In this study, the variables were subjected to a correlation analysis to determine the common method variance among them. To accept that there is no common method variance, the

correlation coefficient between variables cannot exceed 0.90. (Bagozzi et al., 1991; Tehseen et al., 2017). The findings of the correlation analysis are displayed in Table 4. The findings of the research indicate that there is no common method variance.

Table 4. Common method variance bias

		SMU	AP	CEI	SMS	SMA	ICRS
SMU	Pearson Correlation	1	.465**	.577**	.604**	.427**	.580**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
AP	Pearson Correlation	.465**	1	.808**	.734**	.741**	.511**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
CEI	Pearson Correlation	.577**	.808**	1	.782**	.694**	.615**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
SMS	Pearson Correlation	.604**	.734**	.782**	1	.731**	.640**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
SMA	Pearson Correlation	.427**	.741**	.694**	.731**	1	.470**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
ICRS	Pearson Correlation	.580**	.511**	.615**	.640**	.470**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
N		195	195	195	195	195	195

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4. Findings

In the conceptual model, it is assumed that there is a relationship between the variables. Consequently, regression analysis was used to test hypotheses. The regression analysis determined that the Anova p significance level must be below 0.05, VIF values must be less than 10 for the regression assumption to exist, and the beta value must be greater than 0 for the relationship to be considered positive (Durmuş et al., 2016). The outcomes of all hypotheses are shown in Table 5. Each of the H_1 hypotheses was accepted. As anticipated, this study demonstrates that SMU is strongly and positively associated with SM applications. Additionally, the H_2 hypothesis was accepted. Among the H_3 hypotheses, it was determined that AP and SMA had no significant relationship with ICRS.

Table 5. Regression analysis results

H	Independent variable	Dependent variable	R^2	β	F	t	Sig.	VIF	Tolerance	Results
H_{1a}	SMU	AB	0.216	0.529	53.202	7.294	0.000	1.000	1.000	Supported
H_{1b}	SMU	CEI	0.333	0.626	96.439	9.820	0.000	1.000	1.000	Supported
H_{1c}	SMU	SMS	0.362	0.650	110.832	4.722	0.000	1.000	1.000	Supported
H_{1d}	SMU	SMA	0.182	0.534	43.077	6.563	0.000	1.000	1.000	Supported
H_2	SMU	ICRS	0.336	0.607	97.775	9.888	0.000	1.000	1.000	Supported
H_{3a}	AB	ICRS	0.447	-0.580	38.445	-0.618	0.538	0.280	3.571	Not Supported
H_{3b}	CEI	ICRS	0.447	0.337	38.445	3.360	0.001	0.269	3.716	Supported
H_{3c}	SMS	ICRS	0.447	0.444	38.445	4.763	0.000	0.316	3.165	Supported
H_{3d}	SMA	ICRS	0.447	-0.050	38.445	-0.673	0.502	0.374	2.673	Not Supported

5. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the customer-oriented SMU of firms in Türkiye. To achieve this objective, the study takes a holistic approach, analyzing the activities and strategies connecting SMU with its expected causes and effects. It aimed to explore the relationship between firms' reasons for SMU and SMI, as well as the relationship between SMI and targeted customer services and relations. In the conceptual model, 9 hypotheses were explored based on previous research.

In the current study, H_1 sub-hypotheses were supported. Based on the findings, the use of SM in customer relations is significantly and positively related to the company's active use of SM accounts, ongoing communication with customers, encouragement of interaction, prioritization of customer relations in SMS development, and selection of SMA. This study did not contradict previous research that examined the relationship between these concepts in the literature. Our findings align with the results of previous studies that have shown SM's positive impact on customer relations (Maecker et al., 2016; Sasatanun and Charoensukmongkol, 2016; Wang and Kim, 2017; Dewnarain et al., 2019; Gashi and Ahmeti, 2021). While SM is often viewed as a tool in previous research, this study, which uses SMI scale adapted from Tafesse and Wien (2018), also examines company activities and strategies in SM. It is anticipated that this study will contribute to the literature in this area

As a result of the H_2 hypothesis, it was determined that customer-oriented SMU was significantly and positively associated with customer relations and services. This finding aligns with previous research that has explored the relationship between SM and customer communication and service (Kim and Ko, 2010; Parveen et al., 2015; Alalwan et al., 2017; Kantorová and Bachmann, 2018; Tajudeen et al., 2018). Despite variations in country and sample, these results underscore the universal importance of SM for enhancing customer relations.

The relationship between SMI and customer relations and services is investigated in the H_3 hypothesis. It was found that CEI and SMS were significantly and positively associated with customer relations and services. It has been observed that AP and SMA have no relationship with the dependent variable. To better understand these findings, which deviate from the previous literature, evaluating the SMI of companies and their ability to utilize SMA will be essential. Researchers stated SM's

importance, and this study tried to state the benefits of examining SM in detail for better customer relations.

In today's competitive environment, as it has become increasingly challenging to differentiate only through product offerings, the importance of customer relationships and the services they provide has become even more evident. Numerous studies argue that developing these two factors is crucial to achieving the desired results. Since SM is vital to many companies, this channel has also become an essential business tool. Examining the findings obtained from the study's sample limitation reveals that process inputs should be customer-focused to produce outputs related to customer service and relationships. This finding shows that it would be advantageous for companies to consider the customer before acting on SM. When considering the use of SM as a process, it is clear that customer-centered thinking and the organization successfully achieve the necessary goals to achieve the desired results in customer relationships. The main contribution of the study is that it considers SM, which is generally seen as only a tool in the existing literature, as an essential strategic element in customer relationships, reveals the importance of being customer-focused at every step for companies and shows that it is crucial for companies to separate SM into meaningful components and analyze each part in terms of their own specific goals instead of treating it as a single entity.

Statement of Research and Publication Ethics

This study was performed in line with the rules of scientific research and publication ethics. Approval was granted by the Tekirdağ Namık Kemal University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board, 2024-04-02, T2024-1948.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Contributions of the Authors to the Article

The entire study was created by sharing among four authors.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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