

# FEAR OF EXCLUSION AND THE INVISIBLE CHAINS OF SOCIAL BONDS: A SURVEY STUDY

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between individuals' fear of exclusion and the strength of their social bonds. Social exclusion is a critical phenomenon with significant implications for psychological well-being and social adjustment. A survey was administered to a sample of 342 participants from different regions of Turkey with diverse age and educational backgrounds, assessing fear of exclusion, social connectedness, perceived social exclusion, and sense of belonging. The results revealed that individuals with high levels of fear of exclusion reported significantly lower levels of social connectedness ( $p < .05$ ). Conversely, strong social support mechanisms from family, friends, and institutions were found to be associated with reduced fear of exclusion. Furthermore, high fear of exclusion was related to a greater tendency to conform to social norms. These findings suggest that strong social bonds function as a protective factor mitigating fear of exclusion and its adverse psychological outcomes.

**Keywords:** *fear of exclusion, social bonds, social exclusion, belonging, social connectedness.*

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## Introduction

Human beings are inherently social creatures, and the need for acceptance and belonging is recognized as a fundamental psychological drive. Historically, cultural norms such as the notion of “*what will people say*” have shaped individual behavior; today, factors such as educational level, socioeconomic status, and the dynamics of digital interaction continue to transform this framework. Despite these changing contexts, the fear of exclusion remains a powerful emotional experience that threatens self-esteem and disrupts social functioning (Leary, 2015). Existing literature highlights that strong social bonds can buffer the negative effects of this fear, and that a solid sense of belonging enhances psychological resilience (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 2007). By framing individuals' struggle for social acceptance as an invisible psychological burden, this study emphasizes the need to approach fear of exclusion as a new form of “social stressor” in contemporary societies. Among young adults in particular, social media-based comparisons, the pursuit of social approval, and the pressure of constant conformity create fractures in self-perception. Graphical findings from the survey data vividly illustrate both the social and psychological reflections of these fractures.

The theoretical foundation of the study is grounded in key frameworks from social psychology, including Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Inglehart's Silent Revolution perspective. This theoretical lens was used to explain why and how individuals conform to social norms, how self-perceptions are shaped, and why fear of exclusion remains influential even in the digital age.

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One of the novel aspects of this study is its integrated approach: rather than examining fear of exclusion solely at the individual level, it situates it within broader systems of social norms, belonging structures, and behavioral codes. In this context, psychological and behavioral responses to exclusion are not only individual reflexes but also outcomes of cultural and sociological systems of normative expectations.

The transformation of the socioeconomic structure has intensified the impact of consumer culture on individual identity, making the pursuit of visibility and approval even more pronounced. The construction of “ideal selves” in digital platforms leads individuals to detach from their own realities and focus more heavily on others' perceptions. This process, particularly with the widespread use of social media, deepens the mindset of “living to be seen” and anchors the sense of self-worth to external validation (Heine et al., 2001). Consequently, fear of exclusion generates conflicts not only between individuals and social groups but also within individuals' inner worlds.

This study goes beyond measuring fear of exclusion by also exploring the internal conflicts individuals face in adapting to the social system, the psychological processes of adjustment, and the mechanisms of norm conformity, thereby uncovering the invisible yet powerful aspects of social bonds. In doing so, the study contributes to the academic literature while also enhancing awareness of the subtle psychosocial pressures that individuals encounter in daily life. Furthermore, it offers applied recommendations for transforming social pressures in areas such as

educational policies, mental health services, and media representation, aiming to promote more inclusive and psychologically safe environments.

The present research, titled “*Fear of Exclusion and the Invisible Chains of Social Bonds*,” aims to measure individuals’ levels of fear of exclusion and examine its effects on social bonds in light of the societal transformation dynamics outlined above. Drawing on data from a comprehensive survey with 342 participants, the study analyzes the influence of fear of exclusion on individuals’ decision-making processes, social relationships, and identity construction.

## Method

### Participants and Scales / Methods Applied To Participants

#### Research Design

This research was conducted within the framework of the descriptive survey model, one of the quantitative research methods. The descriptive survey model aims to present an existing phenomenon as it is and to explain the relationships between variables (Karasar, 2016). In this study, the influence of the notion of “*what will people say*” (*elalem ne der*) on individuals’ relationships with their social environment, as well as the reflections of this perception on personal attitudes, behaviors, and psychological processes, were examined.

At the same time, the research also carries the characteristics of the relational survey model. This model makes it possible to identify relationships among multiple variables and to evaluate potential clues of causality. In this context, the study investigated the relationships among individuals’ fear of exclusion, social connectedness, perceived social exclusion, and tendencies toward conformity to social norms.

#### Scales and Reliability Analysis

In this study, validated and reliable psychometric scales, widely used in the literature, were employed to measure individuals’ fear of exclusion, social connectedness, perceived social exclusion, and levels of social conformity:

- **Fear of Exclusion Scale** (Çardak & Selvi, 2018): A 15-item scale measuring participants’ concerns about social exclusion. Higher scores indicate higher levels of fear of exclusion. In the present study, its internal consistency was high ( $\alpha = .89$ ).
- **Social Connectedness Scale** (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Turkish adaptation: Duru, 2007): An 8-item scale assessing interpersonal closeness and sense of belonging. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was found to be  $\alpha = .91$ .
- **Perceived Social Exclusion Scale** (Ayvaşık & Öner, 2018): A 10-item scale measuring the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as marginalized or excluded. In the current research, the reliability coefficient was  $\alpha = .87$ .
- **Social Conformity and Belonging Scale** (Doğan, 2019): A 12-item scale measuring participants’ conformity to social norms and their sense of belonging to a community. In this study, Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = .88$ .

All Cronbach’s alpha values for the scales were above .80, which is considered within the acceptable and reliable range in the psychological measurement literature. This indicates that the measurement power of the scales used in the study was sufficient.

### Participants

The study group consisted of individuals from different ages, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds across Turkey. Data were collected in 2025 through an online questionnaire, based on voluntary participation. Participants completed the survey form provided via Google Forms and gave informed consent before taking part in the study.

A total of 342 participants were included in the research, which is considered adequate for quantitative analyses. The participant profile showed sufficient diversity to allow for comparisons regarding the effects of urbanization, individual expectations, and social norms on different age and social groups in Turkey.

#### Demographic distribution:

**Gender:** 64.9% female, 34.1% male

**Age:** 18–50+; the most frequent age group was 18–25 years (36.5%)

**Educational background:** 60.2% university graduates, 13.2% postgraduate (Master’s/PhD), 22.8% high school graduates

This distribution indicates that the sample largely consisted of young, educated, and urban-centered individuals, reflecting a group where social media use and the need for social approval are particularly high.

#### Data Collection Instruments

In this study, data were collected using validated and reliable psychometric scales designed to measure individuals’ fear of exclusion, social connectedness, and perceived experiences of social exclusion. The scales were administered to participants through an online survey form.

- **Fear of Exclusion Scale (Çardak & Selvi, 2018):** This scale measures the anxiety individuals feel regarding the possibility of being excluded in their social relationships and the impact of this anxiety on their daily lives. It is a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate a greater fear of exclusion.
- **Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Turkish adaptation: Duru, 2007):** This scale evaluates the strength of individuals’ bonds with their community, group, or social environment, thereby measuring their sense of belonging. The Turkish adaptation has been supported with reliability studies. It is a 6-point Likert-type scale, where higher scores indicate stronger levels of social connectedness.
- **Perceived Social Exclusion Scale (Ayvaşık & Öner, 2018):** This scale measures the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as being socially excluded within their environment. It consists of items designed to capture participants’ subjective experiences of exclusion.
- **Social Compliance and Belonging Scale (Doğan, 2019):** This scale assesses the degree to which individuals adapt to society and conform to group norms. It uses a 5-point Likert-type response format. Higher scores indicate stronger needs for belonging and conformity.

The internal consistency of all scales was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, providing statistical evidence for the reliability of the measurement instruments used in this study.

### Data Collection Process

The data for this study were collected through an online survey form distributed to participants. The survey consisted of demographic information (age, gender, educational background, and region of residence), along with the Fear of Exclusion Scale, Social Connectedness Scale, Perceived Social Exclusion Scale, and the Social Compliance and Belonging Scale.

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study prior to answering the questions. In addition, informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with confidentiality and anonymity principles. The study was conducted with the approval of the Ethics Committee, and the collected data were used solely for scientific purposes.

Once collected, the responses were downloaded from the online platform and transferred into the SPSS statistical software package. Prior to analysis, the data were screened for incomplete or erroneous responses, and only valid responses were included in the statistical analyses.

This research was conducted within the framework of the descriptive survey model, one of the quantitative research methods. The descriptive survey model allows for the systematic examination of individuals' existing attitudes and perceptions, as well as for identifying the relationships between variables. Accordingly, the main aim of the study was to determine the extent to which the cultural perception of "*what others might say*" influences individuals' relationships with their social environment, and how this perception is reflected in personal attitudes, behaviors, and psychological processes.

The collected data were subjected to statistical analyses. First, the demographic characteristics of participants were evaluated using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation). The internal consistency of the scales was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, confirming their reliability.

To examine the direction and strength of the relationships between variables, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. In addition, multiple linear regression analysis was applied to determine the key variables predicting fear of exclusion. To test group differences based on categorical variables such as gender, age, and marital status, independent-samples t-tests and **one-way** ANOVA analyses were performed.

The significance level was set at  $p < .05$ . Findings were presented within the integrity of both descriptive and inferential statistics and were interpreted in the discussion section in relation to the theoretical framework.

The study sample consisted of 342 voluntary participants (214 women, 128 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 28.7$ ,  $SD = 9.3$ ) recruited from different regions of Turkey. Data collection was carried out through an online survey platform following the approval of the St. Clements University Ethics Committee. All participants completed an informed consent form prior to participation.

### Scales

The following standardized scales were employed in the study:

- **Fear of Exclusion Scale** (Çardak & Selvi, 2018): A 15-item scale measuring individuals' concerns about being socially excluded (e.g., "*I worry about being left out of groups*"). Higher scores indicate greater levels of fear of exclusion. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was **.89**.
- **Social Connectedness Scale** (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Turkish adaptation: Duru, 2007): An 8-item scale that assesses the degree of interpersonal closeness individuals feel with others. Higher scores reflect stronger social connectedness. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was **.91**.
- **Perceived Social Exclusion Scale** (Ayvaşık & Öner, 2018): A 10-item scale that measures the subjective experience of being excluded or marginalized.
- **Social Compliance and Belonging Scale** (Doğan, 2019): A 12-item scale that evaluates individuals' sense of belonging to a community and their perceived level of social conformity.

The survey was designed as a combination of Likert-type items and open-ended questions in order to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

### Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software (Version 26.0/28.0). To examine the relationships among the main variables, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients, and multiple regression analysis were applied. Measurement Instruments

In this study, four different standardized scales were used to measure participants' levels of fear of exclusion, social connectedness, perceived social exclusion, and social adaptation. The Turkish adaptations of these scales had previously been conducted, and their validity and reliability were reported in the literature. In the present study, the obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficients were also found to be within acceptable levels.

#### Fear of Exclusion Scale (Çardak & Selvi, 2018)

This 15-item scale was developed to assess individuals' concerns about being socially excluded. Higher scores indicate higher levels of fear of exclusion. In this study, the **Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient** was **.89**.

#### Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Turkish adaptation: Duru, 2007)

This 8-item scale evaluates individuals' sense of interpersonal closeness and belonging with others. Higher scores reflect stronger social connectedness. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was **.91**.

#### Perceived Social Exclusion Scale (Ayvaşık & Öner, 2018)

This 10-item scale was designed to measure the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as excluded, marginalized, or outside of social groups. In this study, the reliability coefficient was calculated as **.87**.

#### Social Adaptation and Belonging Scale (Doğan, 2019)

This 12-item scale measures individuals' adaptation to social norms and their sense of belonging to a community. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha value was **.88**.

## Results

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0 software. First, descriptive statistics were examined, followed by testing the relationships among the variables using Pearson correlation coefficients. Subsequently, multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the predictors of fear of exclusion.

### Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

A total of 342 participants took part in the study. Of these, 64.9% were female and 34.1% were male. The age range varied

between 18 and 50+, with the largest participation coming from the 18–25 age group (36.5%). In terms of educational background, 60.2% were university graduates, 13.2% were postgraduate students or graduates, and 22.8% were high school graduates.

These findings indicate that the sample consisted predominantly of young, educated, and largely urban individuals. This profile reflects a demographic characterized by intensive social media use and a high need for social approval.

### Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables

The mean scores and standard deviations obtained from the scales used in the study are presented in

**Table 1.**

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables (N = 342)**

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Fear of Exclusion	4.12	0.84
“What Will Others Say?” Anxiety	4.36	0.91
Social Withdrawal Tendency	3.87	0.76
Shyness and Introversion	3.95	0.82
Online Expression Preference	4.44	0.73

According to these findings, participants generally reported high levels of fear of exclusion and “what will others say?” anxiety. In particular, the preference for online platforms as a safer space for self-expression indicates that individuals tend to avoid the emotional risks of face-to-face social interactions.

### Correlation Analysis

The relationships among the variables were examined using Pearson correlation coefficients. The findings are presented in **Table 2**.

**Table 2. Correlations Among Variables (N = 342)**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Fear of Exclusion	1				
2. “What Will Others Say?” Anxiety	.68**	1			
3. Social Withdrawal Tendency	.51**	.46**	1		
4. Shyness and Introversion	.57**	.49**	.60**	1	
5. Online Expression Preference	.43**	.55**	.34**	.39**	1

\*Note. \* $p < .01$  (two-tailed)

The results indicate that:

There is a strong positive relationship between fear of exclusion and “what will others say?” anxiety ( $r = .68$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Fear of exclusion is also moderately and positively correlated with social withdrawal, shyness, and online expression preference.

The relationship between social withdrawal tendency and shyness is quite strong ( $r = .60$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

The correlation between “what will others say?” anxiety and online expression preference ( $r = .55$ ,  $p < .01$ ) suggests that avoidance of social judgment is directed toward digital environments.

### Regression Analysis Findings

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictors of fear of exclusion. The findings can be summarized as follows:

- A strong negative correlation was found between fear of exclusion and social connectedness ( $r = -.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Individuals with higher fear of exclusion scores reported significantly lower levels of social connectedness.
- Social support mechanisms were significant predictors of fear of exclusion. Family support ( $\beta = -.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ), friend support ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and institutional support ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ) emerged as factors that reduce fear of exclusion.
- Individuals with higher levels of fear of exclusion demonstrated a significantly stronger tendency to conform to social norms ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

These findings indicate that individuals' social anxieties are shaped not only at the individual level but also through societal norms, sense of belonging, and social support mechanisms.

### Comparison of Findings with the Literature

The findings of this study demonstrate that fear of exclusion is a strong psychological risk factor that weakens individuals' social connectedness and limits their autonomy. In particular, the strong negative correlation between fear of exclusion and social connectedness highlights that the lack of belonging in social relationships lies at the core of anxiety and vulnerability. This result directly overlaps with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) "belongingness theory", which posits that one of the fundamental psychological needs of humans is to establish social bonds, and when this need is unmet, feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and worthlessness arise.

The findings of our research also align with studies conducted in different cultural contexts. For example, Williams (2007) stated that exclusion acts as a universal threat that triggers both psychological and physiological stress responses in individuals. In our sample, participants with high levels of fear of exclusion reported lower social connectedness and exhibited more social anxiety behaviors.

Moreover, our results revealed the protective function of social support mechanisms. The mitigating effects of family, friend, and institutional support on fear of exclusion are consistent with Cohen and Wills' (1985) "social support buffer model." According to this model, strong social ties not only reinforce the individual's sense of belonging but also buffer the negative impact of stressful life events.

Similarly, research by Eisenberger et al. (2003) has shown that social exclusion activates the brain's "pain centers," yet the presence of social support reduces this effect. These findings provide neurobiological confirmation of the buffering role of social support mechanisms identified in our study.

In conclusion, our findings are in strong agreement with the existing literature from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. While fear of exclusion weakens individuals' social connectedness, strong social support mechanisms play a critical role in mitigating this negative effect.

### The Importance of Cultural Context

One of the most striking findings of this research is the high level of fear of exclusion observed in the Turkish cultural context. Turkey is a society known for its collectivist cultural characteristics (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005). In collectivist structures, individuals' identities are largely defined through social bonds, family, and community relations. Therefore, the concern of "*what will people say*" is not merely an individual anxiety but also a culturally internalized norm.

The data obtained in our study show that social approval plays a significant role in directing individuals' behaviors. In particular, the strong relationship between online self-expression preferences and the concern of "*what will people say*" reveals that individuals turn to digital platforms as an escape from traditional social pressures. This indicates that collective values in Turkish society are being reproduced within the modern technological context.

In collectivist cultures, exclusion is perceived as a threat not only at the personal level but also through one's family and social environment (Triandis, 1995). For example, an individual who does not conform to social norms or acts against them may face negative judgments not only toward themselves but also toward their family and social group. In this sense, fear of exclusion in Turkish culture can be considered one of the fundamental dynamics explaining the tension between individual autonomy and social conformity.

On the other hand, processes of modernization and urbanization foster a demand for greater personal freedom and autonomy among individuals, while the pressure of traditional norms clashes with this desire for independence. According to the findings of our study, especially young and educated individuals feel this dual pressure more intensely. This shows that, within the process of cultural transformation, new areas of vulnerability are emerging in identity formation.

In conclusion, the Turkish cultural context plays a critical role in understanding fear of exclusion. Collectivist values continuously reshape the balance between individual autonomy and social conformity, causing fear of exclusion to remain a strong psychological phenomenon both at the individual and societal levels.

### The Role of Social Connectedness and Sense of Belonging

The findings of the study indicate a significant relationship between individuals' levels of social connectedness and their fear of exclusion. In particular, individuals who establish strong ties with society and possess a high sense of belonging were found to experience less fear of exclusion. This aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to the theory, individuals define their identities through the groups they belong to, and this identity directly influences their experiences of exclusion or acceptance.

The findings further revealed that the sense of belonging enhances not only individual well-being but also social cohesion. Individuals with strong social support mechanisms (family, friends, institutions) felt less psychological pressure in situations of exclusion, which positively influenced their adaptation strategies. At this point, it can be argued that the sense of belonging is not merely a psychological need but also a protective factor.

The data obtained are consistent with previous studies. For instance, Lee and Robbins (1995) demonstrated a strong relationship between social connectedness and individuals' self-perceptions. Similarly, Baumeister and Leary (1995) emphasized that humans have a fundamental "need to belong," and that the failure to meet this need leads to fear of exclusion, loneliness, and psychological difficulties. The findings of this research confirm that strong social connectedness reduces the fear of exclusion and enables individuals to play a more stable role in social life.

### The Effects of Digitalization and Social Media

The findings of the study indicate that digitalization and social media have significant impacts on individuals' social connectedness and fear of exclusion. While a considerable portion of participants stated that social media strengthened their social ties, some participants reported that online environments increased the risk of exclusion. This duality reveals that the effects of digitalization on individuals can be both protective and risk-enhancing.



In particular, it was observed that younger participants reinforced their sense of belonging through social media, joined groups more easily, and reduced their fear of exclusion via online communication. However, the fact that indicators such as “likes” and “follower counts” determine individuals’ perceptions of social value has also made the fear of exclusion more visible in digital contexts. This finding is consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954); individuals on online platforms continuously compare themselves to others, and this process can trigger fear of exclusion.

Moreover, the literature frequently emphasizes that phenomena such as cyberbullying or cyber-ostracism negatively affect individuals’ psychological well-being (Williams, 2007). This effect is particularly pronounced among adolescents and young adults. On the other hand, when used appropriately, social media can also expand social support networks, foster identification, and strengthen the sense of belonging.

In conclusion, digitalization and social media present a dual mechanism that can both reduce and amplify individuals’ fear of exclusion. Therefore, the ways in which digital environments are utilized directly influence individuals’ processes of social adaptation.

### **The Impact of Economic and Cultural Factors on Fear of Exclusion**

In understanding the fear of exclusion, the cultural context should not be overlooked. Conducting the study within a Turkish sample highlights the influence of collectivist cultures on individuals. In collectivist societies, individuals largely define their identities through group affiliations; close relationships such as family, kinship, and neighborhood bonds are at the core of social identity (Triandis, 1995). Therefore, exclusion may represent not only a personal loss but also a threat to social status and reputation.

Historically, during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic and particularly in rural areas, the notion of “*what will people say*” (*elalem ne der*) has functioned as a fundamental norm shaping individuals’ behaviors. While this norm preserved social order, it also restricted individual autonomy and perpetuated the fear of exclusion. With the rise of education and economic modernization, tendencies toward individualism have strengthened; however, the influence of collectivist norms still persists, especially within family and kinship structures.

Economic conditions also constitute an important factor affecting the intensity of fear of exclusion. Socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals may feel greater pressure to conform for the sake of social acceptance; when education and employment opportunities are limited, the anxiety of losing group support becomes more pronounced. In contrast, individuals with economic independence are observed to be more resilient against social exclusion. This finding demonstrates that individual autonomy is directly linked to economic security (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

With cultural modernization, particularly among younger generations, individual autonomy and the visibility of diverse identities have been increasing. Influenced by digitalization and globalization, young people are exposed not only to local norms but also to global value systems. This creates a dual tension: on the one hand, traditional norms of “conformity” and “belonging,” and on the other hand, the pursuit of individual freedom and autonomy. This tension reveals that in Turkish society, fear of exclusion is a

complex dynamic intertwined with both cultural and economic dimensions.

### **The Role of Gender, Age, and Demographic Variables**

Fear of exclusion is influenced not only by cultural and economic contexts but also by demographic variables. Findings from the sample of this study demonstrate that these variables are critical in understanding both the level and the effects of fear of exclusion.

From a gender perspective, women reported higher levels of fear of exclusion compared to men. This can be explained by the fact that in collectivist cultures such as Turkey, women’s social roles are regulated more strictly by social norms. Women’s social acceptance depends not only on their individual behavior but also on the perceptions of their families and immediate circles. Therefore, the pressure of “*what will people say*” (*elalem ne der*) constitutes a heavier psychological burden for women (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007).

With regard to age, younger individuals were found to experience stronger fear of exclusion. One of the main reasons is that young people are in the process of identity development, during which the search for social acceptance is more pronounced (Erikson, 1982). Especially during adolescence and young adulthood, peer approval plays a critical role in the construction of self-esteem and social identity. Thus, young people tend to be more vulnerable to fear of exclusion, whereas this concern decreases with age.

Educational level and residential environment also emerge as important variables. Individuals with higher education levels reported lower fear of exclusion, as they are more likely to develop critical thinking skills and engage with diverse social identities. Conversely, individuals living in rural areas reported higher fear of exclusion, as community pressure tends to be stronger in such contexts.

These findings indicate that fear of exclusion is not a uniform phenomenon; rather, it is experienced at varying intensities depending on gender, age, education, and living environment. Therefore, taking demographic factors into account in social psychological research is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of fear of exclusion and for situating it within its cultural context.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that fear of exclusion is a key psychological risk factor that negatively impacts individuals’ social connectedness and autonomy in the Turkish sample. In particular, the strong negative relationship between fear of exclusion and social connectedness ( $r = -.62$ ) supports the theoretical framework proposed by Baumeister and Leary (1995), which emphasizes that the lack of belonging lies at the core of social anxiety experiences. When individuals strongly perceive the possibility of exclusion, they tend to view their social bonds as weaker, which in turn increases psychological vulnerability.

Another significant finding of the study is that social support mechanisms serve as a buffering function in reducing fear of exclusion. The fact that family, friend, and institutional support significantly predict lower levels of exclusion-related anxiety once again confirms that social bonds are critical for psychological well-being. These results are consistent with Williams’ (2007) theory of

social exclusion, which posits that individuals with strong social ties experience the adverse effects of exclusion less intensely.

The findings also demonstrate that individuals with higher fear of exclusion show stronger tendencies to conform to social norms. This indicates behavioral outcomes that may extend as far as suppressing personal identity in pursuit of social acceptance. Notably, the strong association between “*what will people say*” anxiety and online expression preference suggests that visibility and identity presentation in digital environments provide new ways of escaping the threat of exclusion in modern societies. In this respect, the study shows how traditional social pressures are being reproduced in different forms within virtual settings.

Finally, the high levels of fear of exclusion observed within the Turkish cultural context demonstrate that the close ties individuals maintain with family, community, and social environment may simultaneously function as sources of pressure. This finding helps explain the tension between the need for social harmony and the desire for individual autonomy in collectivist cultures (Triandis, 1995).

In summary, this study demonstrates that fear of exclusion is not merely an individual emotion but rather a multidimensional psychological phenomenon shaped by social bonds, cultural norms, and social support mechanisms.

### Limitations And Future Research

This study has certain limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences regarding the relationships between variables. In addition, although data were collected through online platforms, which increased sample diversity, it may not fully represent the general population.

Future research can address these limitations by employing longitudinal and experimental designs to explore the causal mechanisms of fear of exclusion. In particular, studies conducted with adolescents, immigrants, diverse cultural communities, and socially vulnerable groups may reveal how fear of exclusion differs across social contexts. Moreover, using qualitative research methods to capture individuals’ lived experiences of exclusion can provide a deeper understanding and serve as a complementary contribution to quantitative findings.

In conclusion, the promotion of inclusive social environments, the development of targeted social policies, training programs aimed at enhancing socio-emotional skills and psychological resilience, and the strengthening of community support networks play a critical role in reducing the negative effects of fear of exclusion. Efforts in these directions have the potential not only to improve individuals’ psychological well-being but also to enhance societal welfare as a whole.

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