

DIGITAL CUES GUIDING UNFAMILIAR PRODUCT CHOICES ON TURKISH E-COMMERCE SITES

A Master's Thesis

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Ankara
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COMMERCE SITES

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
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by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ANKARA

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E-COMMERCE SITES

By Ayşegül Karabay

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts (in Media and Visual Studies).

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ABSTRACT

DIGITAL CUES GUIDING UNFAMILIAR PRODUCT CHOICES ON TURKISH E-COMMERCE SITES

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M.A. in Media and Visual Studies

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As e-commerce platforms increasingly shape consumer preferences and decision-making processes, this thesis investigates how digital cues influence online shopping behavior and how users interpret these cues. This thesis focuses on two Turkish e-commerce platforms, Trendyol and Hepsiburada, which were examined through scenario-based focus group discussions. This thesis focuses on design features of e-commerce interfaces, such as product information, reviews, and layout, and how users connect these elements to trust, risk perception, and decision-making processes. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides an analytical framework and allows an exploration of how argument quality, personal relevance, responsibility, and prior knowledge shape the processing of persuasive messages through central or peripheral routes. The findings show that participants evaluated products and platforms around trust, uncertainty avoidance, brand value themes. In this way, the thesis demonstrates the

impact of digital cues on consumer behavior within the Turkish e-commerce context. It contributes to discussions on how online shopping environments and product presentations can be more transparent, reliable, and user centered.

Keywords: Trendyol, Hepsiburada, digital persuasion, consumer behavior, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)



ÖZET

E-TİCARET SİTELERİNDE TANIDIK OLMAYAN ÜRÜN SEÇİMLERİNİ YÖNLENDİREN DİJİTAL İPUÇLARI

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E-ticaret platformlarının tüketici tercihlerini ve alışkanlıklarını giderek daha fazla şekillendirdiği bir dönemde, bu tez çevrim içi alışverişte dijital ipucu unsurlarının nasıl işlediğini ve kullanıcılar tarafından nasıl yorumlandığını incelemektedir. Analiz, senaryo temelli odak grup tartışmaları aracılığıyla incelenen Türkiye'nin önde gelen iki platformu olan Trendyol ve Hepsiburada'ya odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışmayı farklı kılan, e-ticaret arayüzlerinin tasarım özelliklerine, ürün bilgisi, yorumlar ve yerleşim düzeni gibi unsurlara ve kullanıcıların bu unsurları güven, risk algısı ve karar verme süreçleriyle nasıl ilişkilendirdiklerine aynı anda dikkat etmesidir. Analitik çerçeve olarak Ayrıntılı Olasılık Modeli (ELM) kullanılmıştır ve bu model argüman kalitesi, motivasyon, kişisel alaka, sorumluluk ve ön bilgi gibi unsurların dijital ipuçlarının merkezî veya çevresel yollarla işlenmesini nasıl etkilediğini araştırmaya imkân tanımaktadır. Bulgular, katılımcıların çevrim içi alışveriş deneyimlerine ilişkin değerlendirmelerinin güven,

belirsizlikten kaçınma, marka değeri gibi temalar etrafında yoğunlaştığını göstermektedir. Bu şekilde tez, dijital ipuçlarının Türkiye e-ticaret bağlamında tüketici davranışını nasıl etkilediğini ortaya koymakta ve çevrim içi alışveriş deneyimlerinin daha şeffaf, güvenilir ve kullanıcı merkezli hale getirilmesine yönelik tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Trendyol, Hepsiburada, dijital ikna, tüketici davranışı, ayrıntılı olasılık modeli (ELM)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

This thesis explores how digital cues, such as star ratings, user reviews, badges, and visual content, influence consumer decision making of unfamiliar cosmetics market products on Trendyol and Hepsiburada. The aim is to understand how consumers process and respond to cues in real-world online shopping scenarios, especially when shopping for cosmetics market products that inherently carry perceived risk. Ultimately, the findings provide insights into how interpretations and displays of cues guide purchasing choices in cosmetics market products, where product claims are not easily verifiable without prior use.

In recent years, e-commerce has reshaped how people make purchases, and Türkiye has emerged as one of the fastest-growing markets in this change. To exemplify, e-commerce activity in Türkiye increased by 88% in 2021, followed by another 68% increase in early 2022 (NielsenIQ, 2022). By 2023, categories like fashion, electronics, and cosmetics market dominated the online retail (iyzico & Dogma Alares, 2023). According to an Ipsos survey, 87% of Turkish consumers view online shopping as

convenient. However, 60% still feel more secure buying from physical stores (ECDB report, 2023).

This change in shopping behavior is part of a broader global shift. Since the first online retail transaction in 1994, the internet has transformed consumer habits (Trenevska et al., 2023). Although “e-commerce” and “online shopping” used interchangeably, it is worth noting that online shopping refers specifically to the act of purchasing products through websites or mobile apps, usually involving home delivery (Cunningham, 2019).

While e-commerce becomes more mainstream, some new challenges that traditional retail might not face are also introduced considering the consumers' experience. One of the main challenges is the inability to physically inspect a product in e-commerce settings, which can make decisions more uncertain. To address this issue, some platforms have integrated user ratings and customer comments to help consumers feel more confident (Lee, 1998). As a part of this, shopping motivations also continue to evolve. For example, people often shop online out of need, but also for the excitement of discovering deals or planning for future needs (Biswas et al., 2024). However, challenges and motivations are interconnected as the physical tangibility of in-store shopping continues to play a crucial role in categories like the cosmetics market.

1.2 Research Problem

One of the central features of online platforms today is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is presented as reviews and ratings in shopping applications.

Information from reviews and ratings can help build trust and raise doubts. Consumers

may wonder whether the reviewer is genuinely independent or incentivized to give a positive opinion (Xue & Phelps, 2004). Consumers tend to rely on external cues to judge intent because it is often difficult to assess a reviewer's credibility. One such cue is the platform itself. Where a review is posted can affect how trustworthy the message feels (Senecal & Nantel, 2004).

As reviews and ratings become more popular information sources, website design also plays a significant role. Online stores now include persuasive features like 3D previews, limited time offers, "Expert Approved" badges, and countdown clocks (Sergeeva et al., 2023). However, the impact of these features becomes more noticeable when the product being considered is new or unfamiliar to the shopper. This creates a sense of uncertainty, especially in cultures that avoid risk and ambiguity (Zhou et al., 2014). Such avoidance results in shoppers looking for alternative and additional cues that are most present in the interface design.

However, not all cues that is presented in the interface carry equal weight. Consumers rank these cues by perceived credibility or usefulness (Sergeeva et al., 2023). At the same time, personal motivation plays a key role in how shoppers engage with these cues (Mulyadi & Efawati, 2024). Moreover, individual characteristics like gender, education, or personality traits can also affect how cues are interpreted (Sergeeva et al., 2023). In other words, the effectiveness of cues may depend on their presence, but also who is interacting with these cues is important. Elements like website quality and brand reputation also build trust and lower perceived risk (Chang & Chen, 2008)

1.3 Significance of the Study and Research Gaps

Consumers do not always do online shopping with deep analysis in the real world. Due to time pressures or limited mental resources, they often use shortcuts to make decisions (Shaham et al., 2020). Therefore, these challenges also make the visual and structural design of e-commerce websites even more important, since these elements guide fast judgments.

Earlier studies on online shopping have focused on regions like East Asia or Western countries. Moreover, they often emphasize influencer endorsements or analyze platforms like Amazon (Garg & Joshi, 2018). However, cultural differences also matter as online shopping habits vary from country to country (Higuera-Castillo et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding how consumers in Türkiye process and respond to online cues is important.

Cosmetics market products present unique challenges. One main reason is that these products often fall into the "experience" goods category. Experience goods imply that quality is hard to judge even after use (Nelson, 1970). Consumers depend on reviews and cues to guide such judgments (Zinko et al., 201). The cosmetics and personal care market in Türkiye has become strategically significant. The cosmetics market includes various products such as skincare, haircare, oral hygiene and fragrance products.

Consumer who are interested in wellness, particularly for clean-label and naturally sourced items, is rising. As a result, local manufacturers producing products like laurel and olive oil soaps also increases to meet the demand. Global trends also influence the Türkiye market. For example, Türkiye imports high-end brands from France and

Germany and exports to regions including Iraq and the United States, with a total export value of \$1.34 billion in 2022 (T.C. Ticaret Bakanlığı, 2023). Furthermore, the cosmetics market is tied to emotional and social motivations, like consumers' identities and lifestyles. Therefore, the Türkiye cosmetics market is currently shaped as local products coexisting with imported high-end brands, particularly in urban areas with high consumer awareness (KPMG Türkiye, 2023).

Understanding how cues function in the cosmetics market category becomes even more relevant given this context. In this category, trust and perceived safety are often as important as price or convenience (Bae et al., 2019). Brand recognition plays a role in consumer behavior (Keller, 1993), the cosmetics market stands out because of its intimate nature and health implications. These concepts have become even more significant in Türkiye, where the cosmetics market is growing but is still facing challenges.

Moreover, many earlier studies relied on quantitative methods. Therefore, there is a gap regarding how users interpret and respond to cues in real-world settings (Jadhav & Khanna, 2016). Even simple interface features like whether reviews are visible at first glance or require a scroll might shape a user's decision-making path (Masłowska et al., 2017).

This research addresses the mentioned gaps and investigates how cues influence individuals' shopping experience in two local e-commerce platforms. Likewise, the current study aims to identify which cues are influential and examines how they are

mentally processed and why they succeed or fail. To sum up, this thesis aims to discover how consumers interpret digital cues they encounter and how those interpretations shape their choices in real-world e-commerce environments. To do so, the following central research question and sub questions will guide this research:

RQ1: How do university students interpret and respond to digital cues when evaluating unfamiliar cosmetic products online?

RQ1a: What role do motivational drivers (e.g., product involvement, uncertainty avoidance, prior knowledge) play in shaping students' engagement with product-related information?

RQ1b: How does perceived risk affect students' use of cognitive strategies and their platform choices?

RQ1c: In what ways does perceive message and review quality influence trust formation?

RQ1d: How do consumers' previous platform experiences shape their tendency to engage in central or peripheral evaluation processes?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to Online Reviews

Online reviews significantly influence consumers' purchase intentions (Huang et al., 2019). Many studies focus on reputation systems on digital platforms. The two key focus areas gaining significant academic interest in this context are seller ratings and product reviews (Das & Kumar, 2022).

Studies examining the impact and role of recommendations on consumers generally fall under personal influence or word-of-mouth (WOM) research (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Beyond the mentioned studies, demographic factors also play a crucial role in how consumers perceive and use review information. Researchers also conduct demographic feature-based investigations. For instance, a study revealed that Millennials prefer star ratings and Gen Xers give more importance to detailed information (Chung et al., 2018). Similarly, ratings influence consumer behavior and purchase intentions. Likewise, younger consumers prefer products with better details and higher ratings (Goes et al.,

2013; Das & Kumar, 2022). The importance of online reviews is particularly pronounced in e-commerce studies.

In online shopping, consumers cannot touch or smell products. Therefore, their purchase decisions rely on information presented on the website. This involves seller-created content on the website and consumer-created information in user reviews. Online sellers typically aim to overcome this challenge by encouraging consumers to share product evaluations. Consumer-created content reflects the experiences, evaluations, and opinions of those who have purchased and used the product. This type of information sharing functions as a new form of Word of Mouth (WOM) (Park et al., 2014).

Researchers examine various factors determining the usefulness of online reviews, including quality, quantity, star ratings, credibility, and reviewer identity (Fernandes et al., 2022). These online customer reviews represent a crucial type of electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) as consumers tend to rely more on them when making product decisions (Choi & Maasberg, 2021).

eWOM refers to any positive or negative online opinions and recommendations about products and services shared by peers who are former or potential customers and shared information as accessible to a broad online audience (Dwidienawati et al., 2020). Online reviews can be categorized into quantitative features, such as average star rating and number of reviews, and qualitative features, such as the text of the reviews. While quantitative features serve as heuristic cues, qualitative features demand more effort to process. Existing literature often misses how customers engage with reviews. To

illustrate, leaving dark whether purchase decisions rely solely on heuristic cues or if reading reviews significantly influences choices (Maslowska et al., 2017).

Electronic customer reviews are comments written by other buyers about products, typically posted on company or third-party websites. These reviews are vital because they provide user-generated content and help lower perceived risk when buying online. They offer extra information, opinions, and personal tips. Longer and more detailed reviews are more helpful, and a high volume of similar feedback enhances perceived trustworthiness (Dwidienawati et al., 2020).

Online platforms have significant control over the design of their rating systems. This control includes the level of detail for ratings, such as thumbs up/down or a 1–5-star scale, how reputation scores are presented, such as average scores or complete histories, and the speed at which new ratings are reflected (Dellarocas, 2006). These design decisions impact on how much sellers should value their reputation and their motivation for fair conduct. Review value, referring to the average star rating, and review volume, reflecting the total number of reviews, are both crucial. For example, volume suggests greater consumer investment and strengthening perceived credibility and trust towards e-retailers in the reviews. (Maslowska et al., 2017).

Chevalier and Mayzlin (2003) studied the impact of consumer reviews on the sales of the same books across Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com. Their findings demonstrate that higher ratings increase sales compared to the other platform. Importantly, although most reviews are favorable, negative reviews, even in smaller

quantities, tend to have a more significant influence than positive ones (Dellarocas, 2005). Based on this study, consumers seek clear and relevant information and evaluate options before purchasing. Online consumer reviews can be text, images, or videos (Zheng, 2021). Such textual and visual information serves as consumer-generated evaluations of products, services, or sellers that address price, function, performance, or usage. Research demonstrates that online reviews significantly influence product choice, consumer attitudes, shopping decisions, and sales performance. However, earlier research on this topic remained limited by focusing on specific industries rather than broader consumer contexts (Zheng, 2021).

Information in online shopping shapes how consumers search, evaluate, and determine what to buy. Consumers mainly aim to gather and compare product information (Dwidienawati et al., 2020). Much of the earlier research in this area has relied on experimental approaches, which often fall short in discussing the impact of reading reviews on purchasing choices (Maslowska et al., 2017). Building on this gap, Bo et al. (2023) conducted a study examining the impact of online reviews on consumer behavior. Their study focused on the identity of the reviewers, the presentation of reviews on websites, the timing of the reviews, and the content. Their findings show that these factors influence customers' reactions to reviews and purchase decisions (Bo et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, despite the abundance of available review information, consumers who search for product details online do not read every available review before making a

purchase decision (Chatterjee, 2001). A single website often contains far more reviews than a potential consumer can realistically review (Sen & Lerman, 2007).

Considering the arguments presented, this thesis conceptualizes online reviews as digital cues that shape consumers' decisions when evaluating unfamiliar cosmetics market products on Trendyol and Hepsiburada. Reviews are regarded as written opinions with textual, numerical, and visual signals contributing to users' decision-making processes. Consistent with the studies discussed above, the focus group discussions showed that participants pay attention to specific details, such as the number of reviews, photos, or comments that address their concerns. For example, some participants filter reviews to show only those with photos, so they can see what the product looks like. Others filter by reading negative reviews to identify potential issues before purchasing. Some participants focus on reviews from users with similar needs, such as having sensitive skin. Furthermore, this study uses the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as framework to understand how and why individuals interpret and respond to cues in different ways.

2.2 Theoretical Framework Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

ELM explains how individuals process information. This model was developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986). Through this model, the central route, which involves careful and effortful analysis of message arguments, leading to more enduring, resistant, and behavior-predictive attitudes, and the peripheral route, which relies on superficial cues and heuristics, resulting in weaker, more temporary, and easily changeable attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), are described. When individuals are motivated and able to

engage with the content, they use the central route. If they lack motivation or ability, they rely on the peripheral route. To exemplify, involvement reflects motivation and prior knowledge indicates ability. Higher engagement leads to better understanding and deeper interpretations. Research shows that strong arguments and relevant information are more influential when people are highly involved, while peripheral cues like the speaker's authority or the quantity of arguments matter more in low-involvement situations. (Park et al., 2019).

ELM has many uses across different fields. It is valuable in psychology, marketing, consumer behavior, business, information systems, communication, and technology studies. ELM has also been adapted for tourism, education, health communication, and hospitality management. This adaptation helps researchers study persuasive communication in settings focused on service and practical applications. (Shahab et al., 2020).

When an individual is highly involved, they carefully think about the content, arguments, and evidence. The message's content is important in the central route because motivated and able people focus on the main points and judge their strength and quality. Attitudes formed this way are more stable and resistant to being changed by new arguments. This long-lasting effect happens because the person has processed and accepted the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, the message's content forms the basis for how engaged individuals evaluate, accept, and internalize persuasive messages.

In contrast, if an individual is less engaged or distracted, they follow the peripheral route. To illustrate, they depend on mental shortcuts. For instance, they may accept the message simply because the speaker appears knowledgeable, attractive, or friendly. Even when the arguments are weak, a person might still be convinced due to these heuristic cues. However, this kind of persuasion tends to be more easily altered. Therefore, the peripheral route relies on subtle and often subconscious cues. For example, the number of arguments in a message, the credibility of the message's source, and the situation in which the message is given matter more in this route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

While central and peripheral routes seem different, people often use both to understand a message (Petty et al. 1997). For instance, both the number of arguments and the quality of the message can work together to persuade. (Miller, 1980).

Petty and Cacioppo (1986) explain motivation and ability based on their causes. Some causes come from the situation, while others are personal traits. Some factors affect how much information an individual processes, while others affect how an individual think about that information objectively or with bias. Factors that increase motivation to process information include how relevant it is, the desire to think deeply, having more sources of information, and feeling responsible for judging the message. On the other hand, factors that improve the ability to process information include having no distractions, controlling the pace of the message, repeating the message, and understanding it easily. (Lien, 2002). Building on this, Deng (2022) has found several factors that affect how likely people are to elaborate, including their involvement with

the topic, their confidence, their need for deep thinking, and their cognitive ability.

Motivation and ability concepts are relevant for understanding how unfamiliarity impacts the prioritization of cues. Users inherently have low prior knowledge of unfamiliar cosmetics market products, translating to a low ability to engage in analytical processing.

The ELM argues that any single variable can influence attitudes by functioning as an argument or a cue, depending on the individual's motivation and capacity to evaluate the message. The ELM suggests these variables do not always serve as central or peripheral cues. When individuals are motivated and able to think critically, these variables can have additional meanings and roles. (Petty & Brinol, 2008).

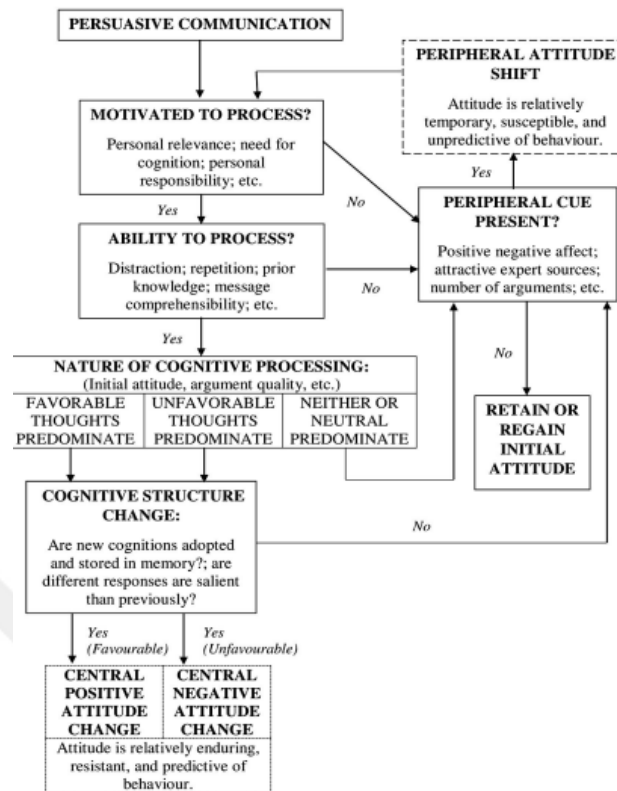


Figure 1: *ELM in Different Fields and Methodological Approaches adopted from Petty and Cacioppo (1986), later by Shahab et al., 2021.*

Note. Schematic depiction of ELM adopted from Petty and Cacioppo (1986), later by Shahab et al., 2021.

Shahab et al. (2020) provides a schematic depiction of how ELM works. They also outline the main research areas of relevant research and the model's application in a broad array of disciplines. The model has been primarily applied in marketing followed by psychology, health communication, education and tourism. While this schema of the ELM provides a structured process for explaining persuasive communication, it cannot be applied directly to focus group discussions, as focus groups are not designed to measure shifts in attitude through controlled environment. Instead, the themes that emerged in this thesis revealed the concepts embedded within the schema, such as argument quality, motivation, personal relevance, responsibility, and prior knowledge.

In this way, the model's underlying constructs guided the interpretation of participants' reflections on digital cues, even though the schematic process was not directly implemented.

Regarding the methodological approaches in ELM research, Shahab et al. (2020) also explain how research methods in ELM studies have changed. From 1984 to 2001, ELM research relied only on experimental techniques, and no survey-based studies. Moreover, experimental techniques continued to increase between 2002 and 2010. However, there has been a methodological shift between 2011 and 2019. During these periods, surveys increased and exceeded experiments. This might reveal a gradual shift in understanding user opinions and expand data collection methods.

Besides ELM, other relevant models and theories have also been adapted to study the consumer decision-making process. One was the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which explains how users accept and trust technology. Another theory, the Information Adoption Model (IAM), explains the motivations that drive individuals to engage with information shared in computer-mediated communications (Sussman & Siegel, 2003). Signaling Theory is also adapted to study situations when individuals lack complete information or are uncertain about their stance on a particular issue (Shaham et al., 2020). Even though these frameworks provide insights into specific aspects of consumer behavior, they are limited in scope as none fully include the elements that influence overall decision-making (Zhou et al., 2014). On the other hand, ELM explains how different factors can affect individuals' attitudes in various situations by integrating central and peripheral routes.

ELM explains how different factors can affect people's attitudes in various situations by integrating central and peripheral routes. Especially within contemporary dual-process models (See Appendix A), a single variable may influence persuasion through multiple processes (Petty & Briñol, 2008). ELM is built on earlier dual-process theories but extends the framework for greater flexibility in how variables operate (Petty & Briñol, 2008).

2.3 Foundational Concepts in Online Consumer Behavior

This thesis mediates the assumption that focus group participants presume that they have gone through the experience of online shopping, which includes everything from gathering information before a purchase to the interactions that follow the transaction is complete (Amarullah et al., 2022). Throughout this experience, consumers continuously adapt their decision-making strategies by learning from different situations and feedback from other users (Campo & Breugelmans, 2015, as cited in Amarullah et al., 2022). As a result, the online shopping experience plays a key role in reducing feelings of uncertainty and potential risk by offering essential details about products, services, and available choices.

ELM is the central framework used in this thesis. According to ELM, individuals follow one of two paths when processing information. The central route involves careful and thoughtful engagement with the content. This is more likely to happen when individual feels motivated, usually due to a strong interest in the product, and has the mental capacity or prior knowledge to understand the message. Well-organized descriptions and

facts are especially persuasive in this context because they appeal to reasoning and help create deeper cognitive responses (Lien, 2001).

On the other hand, when motivation or ability is lacking the individual follows the peripheral route. In such cases, individuals rely on superficial cues like how attractiveness or how many people have reviewed a product. These types of cues may influence a person's attitude temporarily, but the effect tends to be weaker and more prone to change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). A descriptive aspect of this model is that various elements, such as the message's source or the context in which it is received, may serve different roles depending on how deeply a person processes the content. For example, a message may be interpreted as a strong argument in one case and just as a surface cue in another (Petty & Brinol, 2008). People who are not strongly motivated save mental energy using quick shortcuts rather than deeply analyzing the message (Maslowska et al., 2017). Whether someone takes a central or peripheral route depends heavily on how personally involved they are and how much they already know. In this case, involvement can be temporary, such as during a specific decision, or it can reflect a long-term interest in a topic (Koufaris et al., 2014). Consumers who feel more involved are likely to seek detailed information and comparisons (Yen et al., 2024). Prior knowledge supports their ability to evaluate this information effectively. Even people who know less about a product may still search for details when they care deeply about the purchase (Lien, 2002).

Online trust is particularly important in e-commerce because consumers cannot directly interact with products or sellers. This creates an information gap between the consumer and seller, therefore, increases the sense of risk (Park et al., 2003). In that case, trust is a

bridge by fostering the belief that the seller is competent, prioritizes the buyer's interests, and behaves fairly and honestly (Mayer et al., 1995). Trust helps fill that gap by belief that the seller is competent, has the buyer's best interest in mind, and acts fairly and honestly (Mayer et al., 1995). Trust can be formed within the ELM through the central or peripheral routes. Detailed information like security measures and privacy statements can strengthen trust through central route, while website design or a familiar brand may build trust through peripheral routes (Yang et al., 2006). Moreover, appealing websites can reduce the effort needed to search for information which can increase trust (Xu & Liao, 2020). Trust extends beyond individual sellers to the platform as a whole. This form of trust depends on how well the platform handles conflict, its regulations, and its overall reputation (Koufaris et al., 2014). Trust becomes especially critical in categories like cosmetics, as the product's authenticity is highly important.

Perceived risk defined as sense of potential loss or negative outcomes when purchasing (Bauer, 1960). It is based on individual perceptions and can shape how much information people seek before buying something (Pires et al., 2006). This is even stronger in online settings online because of intangibility. Some products, health or appearance related, naturally come with more risk than others (Pires et al., 2006). To reduce the product related risks, consumers often rely on available information. This information can include cues like prices, user feedback, brand familiarity or detailed product knowledge, which provide predictability to minimize concerns (Fang et al., 2023; Nepomuceno, 2014). Therefore, trust and information are closely tied. Individuals feel more confident purchasing when product details are clear and reliable (Amarullah et

al., 2022). Online reviews play a major role in this process by offering firsthand accounts of a product's performance (Fang et al., 2023).

In online shopping environments, persuasion occurs as users are exposed to different types of messages. These messages aim to influence what people think or do (Perloff, 2003). Consumers often make decisions based on reasoned arguments and quick judgments. When the product is highly relevant to the buyer, they are more likely to engage with the details and form stronger opinions. In such cases, informative descriptions and comparisons shape attitudes and buying decisions (Teng & Khong, 2015).

On the other hand, some consumers focus more on heuristic cues when they are less interested or have limited time. These cues might include how credible or well-liked the message source is, or how many people have bought the item. For example, customer reviews can be more persuasive than seller descriptions because they are seen as more authentic (Fernandes et al., 2022). Cues like best seller or star ratings can also act as heuristics that suggest popularity or quality. Even the number of reviews or the product price can become signals that help consumers judge whether a product is worth buying (Teng & Khong, 2015). Images, videos, and other visual elements are especially powerful. They make content easier to understand and more appealing, therefore, often influence trust and expectations (Park et al., 2003).

E-commerce platforms differ from traditional retail because they include human-computer interaction within the interface that connects users to digital services

(Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). Personal preferences, social influences, cultural norms, and psychological responses shape consumer behavior in online shopping. Recently, researchers increasingly pointed out that how a website is designed can significantly influence how consumers' decision-making processes. In particular, the overall quality of a website's layout, organization, and visual appeal can affect users' opinions about product quality and even lead to unplanned purchases (Trenevskaja, 2023).

Website design is evaluated through its layout, ease of use, and visual appeal. Previous studies show that specific components of website design contribute to consumer satisfaction and long-term loyalty (Trenevskaja, 2023) as users feel more confident and satisfied with the overall experience (Tzavlopoulos et al., 2019). Perceived good design can reduce perceived risk and help consumers make more comfortable decisions. Features like filtering tools and responsive customer service also enhance satisfaction and trust (Park et al., 2003). Since consumers cannot touch or test products in person, they might rely on how the platform communicates with them.

According to the ELM, how users engage with a website depends on how likely they are to focus on its main messages. At the same time, they may either process or overlook additional cues (Deng et al., 2022). *Interface design* can be understood through four components. Graphic design attracts visual attention, structure design organizes the content, content design includes the text and visuals users rely on for product details, and social-cue design brings in human features like chat support or profile images of service agents. These elements influence how consumers behave. (Wuryandari, 2019). However, how interface features shape consumers' purchasing choices remains unclear.

For instance, Fogg et al. (2002) found that almost half of users paid more attention to how a website looked than its content (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). Visuals are particularly important in online shopping because consumers depend on them to imagine the product. More importantly, if the products appear visually appealing, such influence can override the trust (Deng et al., 2022). Moreover, interface becomes even more essential on mobile devices since the screen space is limited. Extremely complex visuals require more effort to process, which leads to frustration and lower satisfaction. Well-designed layouts help people find information faster and feel more in control (Chen & Zhai, 2023). Advancements in technology now allow online platforms to fine-tune features like feedback systems in ways that are not possible in physical stores (Dellarocas, 2005).

The way information is presented also has some challenges. For example, reviews can be unclear, which might lead to different interpretations among consumers. The quality and quantity of information is also major challenges because lack of detail or an overload of information can harm the decision-making process. When people feel they have too little or too much information to work with, their trust declines, and their confidence in making the right choice is reduced (Zinko et al., 2019). Too much information can make users feel overwhelmed and anxious, lowering satisfaction and leading to poor decisions. To cope, consumers often scan through reviews or focus only on what seems most relevant. Visuals can ease this process by making complex information more digestible and giving extra context that written text might not provide (Zinko et al., 2019).

Online reviews often include both positive and negative opinions. When this combination reaches a certain number, it can make it harder for consumers to weigh the pros and cons (Bo et al., 2023). Still, many consumers prefer this combination of reviews because it offers a more complete picture of the product (Bo et al., 2023). The relationship between review quantity and quality is also important. Detailed and informative reviews are more likely to influence decisions than vague or overly emotional ones (Park et al., 2019). More involved consumers tend to analyze each review. In contrast, less involved consumers often look for ratings and total review numbers (Park et al., 2019).

Scarcity cues are messages like “only a few left” or “offer ends soon,” that create urgency to act quickly. These cues often boost purchasing behavior by increasing products' perceived value (Figl & Friedrich, 2020). Scarcity indicators work in different ways. Sometimes, scarcity cues suggest that a product is in high demand, which can be taken as a quality cue. Other times, they act as surface cues that pressure people to act fast without thinking thoroughly. These cues may even influence consumers' thoughts about their choices or create emotional reactions like stress (Petty & Wegner, 1999). How effective these cues are depending on the product type, the consumers' personality, and whether the urgency seems genuine (Figl & Friedrich, 2020).

In some cases, the existence of these cues and how platforms and sellers use them can lead to negative outcomes. When cues like scarcity conflict with the actual quality of a product, it can cause cognitive dissonance, a state of internal conflict or discomfort (Festinger, 1957). For example, if a consumer purchases a product with a limited stock

label but finds the product disappointing, they may question the platform's honesty or regret the purchase. Cognitive dissonance theory explains that people naturally try to resolve these conflicts by changing their beliefs, justifying their actions, or ignoring the contradiction (O'Keefe, 2009; Figl & Friedrich, 2020). These feelings often lead to reassessing the shopping platform or even publicly complaining through online reviews (Henning-Thurau et al., 2003). While dissonance usually arises after a purchase, it can also occur earlier if consumers sense that the persuasive message does not match reality. In some cases, though, a limited-time offer may help individuals feel better about a quick decision by allowing them to justify the purchase. However, if the product fails to meet expectations, the dissonance can result in lower satisfaction and more critical reviews (Figl & Friedrich, 2020).

Brand also plays a central role in how consumers interpret the product. Familiar brand names or authority figures can influence without a deep analysis of the content (Maheswaran et al., 1992). In more significant purchase decisions, consumers may carefully analyze product features. In such cases, brand familiarity continues to matter but becomes part of more systematic evaluation. As mobile shopping becomes more common, these shortcuts have become more important. Familiar brands help shoppers feel more confident and make companies more likely to invest in digital marketing (Ratchford et al., 2022). Brand loyalty can be described as the repeated purchase of a particular brand, is built on familiarity, perceived quality, and consistent positive experiences (Aaker, 1991). When consumers recognize a brand, they feel more secure, especially in an environment where they cannot physically test the product. In online shopping, brand reputation fills in the gaps created by a lack of personal inspection.

Consumers use brand names to reduce uncertainty and guide their decisions. Those who are more experienced or knowledgeable about a product category generally feel less risk and are more confident in judging the value of a product (Park et al., 2019).

Price is another key factor that shapes purchasing decisions. Consumers also develop images of a store or a brand based on how prices are presented, and these perceptions influence their willingness to buy. Individuals who are more sensitive to price may focus more on discounts. Expensive items usually require more thought and involvement, which leads to central route. Reviews provide insight into less visible features while price can indicate quality (Maslowska et al., 2017).

Reputation systems help reduce uncertainty in platforms (Dellarocas, 2003). Platforms give users a clearer picture of what to expect and reduce the perceived risk that is associated with online purchases through visually presenting customer feedback (See Table 1) (Dellarocas, 2005).

The above-mentioned cues shape purchase intention, which can be understood as a consumer's willingness to buy a product based on how they perceive it (Yen et al., 2024). Intention can change over time and depends on emotional and rational factors (Gunawan & Septianie, 2021). Intention often decreases when information is unclear or incomplete because perceived risk rises (Park et al., 2005). In contrast, consumers with prior online shopping experience tend to make decisions more confidently and are better at identifying trustworthy platforms and detecting potential risks (Amarullah et al., 2022). Many of the earlier studies focus on trust between customers and sellers,

however, it is also important to understand trust in the multivendor platforms themselves (Lu et al., 2016). Since perceived risk can hold consumers back from purchase, the credibility of online reviews can help bridge this gap. Reviews seen as trustworthy can make people more willing to buy, even when other concerns remain still (Amarullah et al., 2022). This is especially true in categories like cosmetics, where consumers look for believable user-generated content. Therefore, purchase intention can be viewed as the outcome of a decision-making process influenced by perceived value, risk, and the overall platform experience (Pires et al.).

Table 1*Examples of Online Feedback Mechanisms*

Web Site	Category	Summary of feedback mechanism	Format of solicited feedback	Format of published feedback
Amazon	international e-Commerce	Product reviews and star ratings after purchase. “Helpful” votes on reviews increase visibility.	Star rating (1–5), written review, photos, Q&A	Aggregated rating, chronological and most helpful reviews
Trendyol	Multivendor e-Commerce	Rate products and sellers’ post-purchase. Reviews can include photos.	Star rating, written review, optional photo, size feedback	Average rating, buyer-uploaded images, verified purchase tag
LC Waikiki	Single vendor e-commerce	Reviews on clothing items after purchase, including star ratings and comments.	Star rating, optional review, comment, size info	Public review section with average rating, size feedback

Note. This table is adapted from the conceptual framework outlined in Dellarocas (2003) and Dellarocas (2005). The examples (Amazon, Trendyol, LC Waikiki) illustrate how various platforms operationalize reputation through different solicited and published feedback formats.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This thesis follows two central research questions. The first examines how digital cues are integrated into the design of e-commerce platforms. The second explores how users interpret and respond to these cues when evaluating unfamiliar cosmetics products. The thesis provides an exhaustive understanding of digital cues' role in online shopping decisions.

The first research question focuses on platform design. It aims to explore how cues such as star ratings, review counts, layout of user-generated content, and product visuals are presented on the product pages of Trendyol and Hepsiburada. This analysis aims to understand which components are presented on the interfaces.

The second research question addresses user experience. To examine, five focus group discussions and a Pre-focus group Likert-type questions were conducted with undergraduate students at Bilkent University during the spring semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. Participants were between 18 and 24 years old and had prior experience with online shopping. Each session was organized around a semi-structured

questionnaire, including QR codes (See Appendix C and D) that directed participants to product pages for evaluation. The products (See Appendix C) are chosen as Topaxx Saç Sakal Pudrası (Topaxx Medium Brown Hair and Beard Thickening & Root Concealer Powder) and Orginx Genital Bölge Koku Mantar Akıntı Giderici Genital Bölge Beyazlatma Etkili Intim Köpüğü (Orginx Intimate Foam for Genital Odor, Yeast, and Discharge Relief with Whitening Effect).

Focus groups were chosen as the primary method, since they mirror social discussions that often shape consumer choices in everyday life. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. ELM provided the theoretical framework for interpreting participant responses and was used to make distinctions between central and peripheral processing of cues.

3.1 Objects of Analysis

Initial pilot study included Pre-focus group Likert-type questions, product ranking, and descriptive word selection, followed by moderated focus group discussions. Participants reviewed three unfamiliar products (a beard serum, lip plumper, and shampoo) via screenshots and live QR code access, and then they were asked to evaluate these product representations.

However, during the pilot study phase, several methodological limitations occurred.

First, the word selection task was too restrictive, and the multi-phase structure of the study led to uneven pacing and participant fatigue. As a result, many participants were disengaged by the time discussions began. Moreover, participants had different

experience levels with Trendyol and Hepsiburada. Therefore, this situation introduced bias based on brand familiarity. These issues required significant revisions for the overall study design.

In response, several adjustments were made. First, only native Turkish speakers were included in the final study to establish that all participants interpreted the same language-based cues in related contexts. Second, unfamiliar brands and products were selected to reduce the influence of brand and product recognition. Third, the ranking and word selection tasks were removed to reduce cognitive load and allow participants to express their impressions more freely without picking words from a predetermined list. The study was restructured around scenario-based focus group discussions to imitate a real-life shopping experience. The aim was to encourage participants to narrate their decision-making processes more naturally.

As part of this thesis, a multi-phase platform evaluation was conducted to determine which e-commerce platforms would be included in the design analysis. The process began with several widely used platforms, including Trendyol, Hepsiburada, Amazon, n11, Çiçeksepeti, Pazarama, PttAVM, TEMU, and AliExpress. These were evaluated according to three predefined criteria: (1) the presence of “alışveriş” (shopping) in their names, (2) a multivendor system, and (3) a user review and rating system. Based on these, Trendyol, Hepsiburada, Amazon, n11, Çiçeksepeti, and Pazarama advanced to the second phase, which assessed review usability. All included rating displays and access to full reviews, but only some offered interactive features. The final phase examined advanced review options such as decimal-based ratings, distributions, and feature-

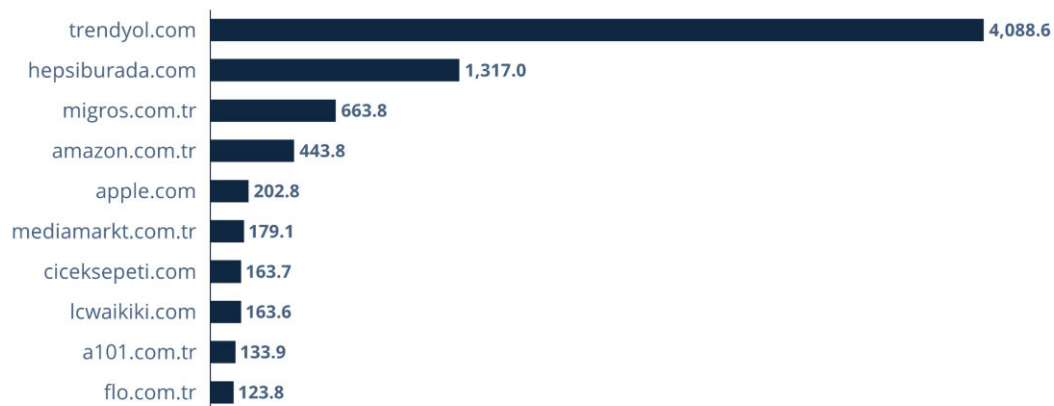
specific feedback. Most also included keyword-based filtering, except Hepsiburada. In conclusion, Trendyol, Hepsiburada, n11, and Çiçeksepeti passed all three phases.

Trendyol and Hepsiburada were ultimately selected for detailed analysis due to their market dominance in Türkiye, interface strategies, and extensive use of cues. Both employ mechanisms such as product ratings, customer reviews, seller verification badges, urgency messages, and recommendations, but their presentation differs significantly.

According to ECDB (2023), Trendyol dominated Türkiye's e-commerce market in 2023, followed by Hepsiburada and Migros.com.tr. Other major online stores included Amazon, Apple, and Mediamarkt, while platforms like Çiçeksepeti, LC Waikiki, A101, and FLO also appeared among the top ten.

TOP 10 ONLINE STORES IN TURKEY BY REVENUE, 2023

in million US\$



Sources: ECDB.

ECDB

Figure 2: ECDB. (2023). *Top 10 online stores in Turkey by revenue, 2023* [Infographic]. ECDB.

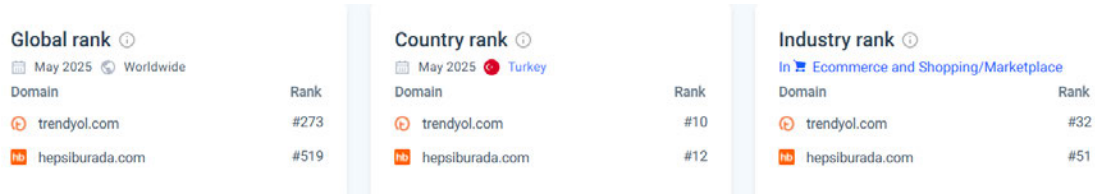


Figure 3: Similarweb. (2025, May). Website performance overview: Trendyol.com vs. Hepsiburada.com. Similarweb DigitalSuite.

This dominance is further reflected in web traffic. In May 2025, Trendyol ranked 10th and Hepsiburada 12th among the most visited websites nationally. Within the e-commerce and shopping category, Trendyol held the 32nd position while Hepsiburada ranked 51st (Similarweb, 2025).

Hepsiburada began as Infoshop.com.tr before rebranding after its acquisition by Doğan Holding. By 2007, it had already reached \$50 million in revenue (Onbaş, 2020). Today, it operates from a 14,000 m² facility in Sultanbeyli, Istanbul, with a team of 300 employees. In 2023, it reported processing around 10 million daily orders (Hepsiburada, n.d.). The platform gained international attention when Goldman Sachs acquired shares in 2018 and has built strong consumer trust and loyalty, winning "E-commerce Site of the Year" three times (2011–2013) and being recognized as one of Türkiye's most beloved brands (Onbaş, 2020).

Trendyol, founded in 2010 with \$300,000 in capital, reached a valuation of \$150 million within eighteen months. It was the first online platform in Türkiye to support local designers by showcasing their collections to a nationwide audience (Mutlu, 2018). It quickly expanded to include a wide range of products featuring local designers and global brands. Reflecting its rapid growth, Alibaba became the majority shareholder in

2018 (Onbaş, 2020). As of February 2025, Trendyol.com remained Türkiye's leading e-commerce platform, ranking 260th globally and 10th nationally. Compared to competitors, Trendyol users engage more frequently, spend more time on the site, and view more pages per session (SimilarWeb, 2025).

Beyond their market positions, the two platforms differ in their approaches to cues. On Trendyol, these cues are highly visible: star ratings and review counts appear directly in search results, reducing navigation steps. Hepsiburada, by contrast, emphasizes text-heavy trust signals, such as "verified purchase" labels and seller credibility scores, which are more prominent in descriptive text.

Studies on Turkish e-commerce platforms such as Trendyol and Hepsiburada have mainly focused on customer preferences, reviews, and trust. Kemora and Pasaribu (2023) surveyed 117 young consumers in Istanbul and found that 84.6% preferred Trendyol. They showed that interactivity, usability, and entertainment improved customer attitudes, while information quality and personalization had adverse effects. Kaya (2020) highlighted the strong role of reviews, showing that customers rely on their number, content, and credibility when deciding to buy. Paker and Kızılırmak (2023) analyzed reviews of headphones and sunscreens on Trendyol, identifying five themes: product quality, seller trust, logistics, value, and promotions. Negative reviews often focused on fake products and poor packaging, while positive ones emphasized fast delivery and discounts. Eyice Başev (2014) studied Hepsiburada using the Theory of Planned Behavior and found that trust, lifestyle fit, and cultural attitudes encouraged online shopping, while privacy and security concerns reduced it.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

A total of 23 students from Bilkent University participated in five focus groups. Most participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the GE250/251 program. The sessions were scheduled between April 21 and May 9, 2025, each lasting approximately 60–75 minutes. Participants received GE points as an incentive for their involvement.

Bilkent University students were recruited via the university's internal email system for the focus groups. Students enrolled in classes were allowed to collect points for their participation. Participants were required to be undergraduate students at Bilkent University, aged 18–24, native Turkish speakers, and familiar with Trendyol and Hepsiburada. They also needed prior experience purchasing cosmetic products online to navigate interfaces naturally and evaluate cues without spending additional time learning platform functionalities. This age restriction was applied to represent one of Turkey's most active online consumer demographics while ensuring a technologically proficient user base. Cosmetic products were chosen as the focal category because they are classified as experience goods, where evaluations depend on skin type, personal preferences, and color matching. Since many cosmetics brands do not accept returns for opened products, consumers rely heavily on reviews, ratings, and user-generated content, making pre-purchase evaluation and interpretation of textual and visual information particularly critical.

The final sample included 23 participants, 18 female and five male. Requiring native Turkish speakers ensured that participants could engage naturally with platform content,

as both Trendyol and Hepsiburada present product descriptions, promotional messages, and consumer reviews in Turkish.

A recruitment form was distributed on 06/02/2025, and 133 responses were gathered. The form collected demographics, shopping habits, and willingness to participate and record. Responses were analyzed according to the inclusion criteria. After that, invitations to focus groups were sent (See Appendix J) (See Appendix K).

Even though the focus group schedule was planned, ongoing student protests on campus led to significant disruptions and a high participant dropout rate. The sessions were rescheduled in response, and a follow-up email was sent to potential participants. This email included an Excel sheet listing five new time slots, each with a capacity of seven participants. Students were asked to write their initials in an available group and were asked to select an alternative time slot if their preferred one was already full.

Furthermore, students who could no longer attend were requested to notify the moderator at least two days in advance via email and by updating the shared Excel sheet. Despite these adjustments, some slots had too few participants due to exam-related scheduling conflicts. To address this, participants were encouraged to share the invitation with peers who might be interested and eligible. As such, snowball sampling is also applied to the recruitment process.

Ethical approval (no. 645) was obtained from Bilkent University's ethics committee on 27/01/2025. Informed consent was secured at every stage through forms and detailed explanations of the study's objectives, methodology, and expected contributions.

Students were informed that completing the eligibility survey did not constitute consent

for focus group participation. Before each session, participants signed informed consent forms confirming voluntary participation and their right to withdraw without consequences. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing participant identities and avoiding using personal identifiers in the data.

Table 2

Participant Breakdown by Session

Focus Group Number	Date	Number of Participants	Gender	Notes
FG1	21/04/2025	4	Female (n=3) Male (n=1)	One participant did not have the Trendyol app
FG2	25/04/2025	4	Female (n=4)	
FG3	25/04/2025	4	Female (n=4)	
FG4	28/04/2025	7	Female (n=5) Male (n=2)	
FG5	09/05/2025	4	Female (n=2) Male (n=2)	One participant did not have the Trendyol app
Total		23	Female (n=18) Male (n=5)	

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The products used in the sessions were carefully selected to reflect unfamiliar items for the target demographic. Each product page and image shown during the discussions was taken directly from real e-commerce websites to capture authentic participant reactions. Selection was guided by the Cosmetic Product Categories and Codes list prepared by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which helped identify suitable cosmetic product categories and items for analysis.

To explore how digital cues influence online consumer behavior, two unfamiliar cosmetic products were selected for the focus group discussions. The first product, Topaxx Medium Brown Hair and Beard Thickening & Root Concealer Powder, is a topical cosmetic designed to fill in sparse areas of hair or beard visually. The second product, Orginx Intimate Foam for Genital Odor, Yeast, and Discharge Relief with Whitening Effect, is positioned within the feminine cosmetic enhancement category.

To begin each focus group session, the researcher introduced the study. This introduction included a detailed explanation of the purpose of the research. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from study at any time. Additionally, the researcher addressed the procedure for recording the sessions and the confidentiality of the participants.

After participants had signed and delivered the consent form, the researcher began recording the session. Later, the participants were introduced to the 5-point Pre-focus group Likert-type questions. All items were rated using a 5-point Pre-focus group

Likert-type questions ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Once all participants had finished filling out the 5-point questionnaire, the researcher proceeded to present a scenario that was prepared. This scenario was then read aloud to the participants before continuing the study.

The holiday season is approaching, and your class is organizing a "Secret Santa" gift exchange. Your task is to buy a gift for your classmates. However, due to the total number of students in the class, you have been given a special responsibility to choose gifts for two classmates: one female and one male.

You do not know these classmates very well, but through short conversations and observations with other classmates, you have discovered a common trait: both are interested in cosmetics market products. Based on this information, and due to limited time, you decided to use online shopping platforms instead of visiting physical stores.

After spending some time researching, you've decided on the gifts you want to purchase. However, just before completing the transaction, you hesitated. You found yourself in a dilemma while comparing two shopping apps. You might normally prefer one of these apps, but for this decision, I'd like you to base your choice on the products that will be presented to you. When evaluating which platform offers you a better experience, which platform would you choose?

After completing the scale, they were presented with a scenario involving participating in a gift exchange and choosing cosmetic products for two classmates. The discussion began with an icebreaker about past gift-buying experiences. Then, participants talked about what caught their attention when browsing product pages. As the session progressed, they were asked to reflect on which features had influenced their decisions, how they had evaluated unfamiliar products, and what differences they had noticed between the two platforms.

The group discussions followed a clear structure, focusing on several core themes related to online shopping and the role of reviews. Participants began by reflecting on their previous experiences with different shopping platforms. They discussed the extent to which online reviews influenced their intentions to purchase products, providing valuable insight into how such cues shape decision-making. The conversations then moved toward the strategies participants used to seek product-related information before making a choice.

A comparison between various platforms and their approaches to product presentation also emerged as an important topic. Furthermore, participants shared their thoughts on how authority figures or brand endorsements influenced their shopping behavior. In addition to these focused themes, many discussions organically touched on broader concerns. Participants voiced their opinions about brand sponsorships, the political positioning of companies in Türkiye, and how government regulations might influence their trust in online platforms.

This study's Pre-focus group Likert-type questions scale comprises 12 statements about their online shopping routines and behaviors. It was explained to participants that this activity aimed to be a warm-up to the topics and discussions planned for the session. Its primary aim was to inform participants about cues, interface design, and user experience regarding their shopping habits. The Pre-focus group Likert-type questions scale also helped to create a shared thematic foundation and prepared the participants for the discussion. All items were rated using a 5-point Pre-focus group Likert-type questions

ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). In addition, platform-based popularity cues are determined by four items evaluated on a five-point Pre-focus group Likert-type questions scale. In contrast, elements of perceived scarcity (one item), product badges (one item), consumer-uploaded photos and reviews (five items), and emotion and appeal (one item) are assessed.



Table 3*Pre-focus group Likert-type Items*

Item No.	Content	Resource
Q1	I enjoy discovering products that seem popular during online shopping.	Mainardes et al.
Q2	Time-limited offers often create an impression that the product is important.	Marjerison et al. (2022)
Q3	Seeing high ratings for a product influences my decision, even if I have no prior experience with it.	El-Said (2020), De Pelsmacker et al. (2018)
Q4	I feel more secure trying a new product that many people have tested and approved.	Lu et al. (2016)
Q5	I associate “Best Seller” labels with reliable and popular products.	

Q6	Visually detailed ratings and reviews are more informative to me than text-heavy ones.	Wang et al., (2024)
Q7	Labels like 'Vegan,' 'Best Seller,' or 'Expert Approved' displayed on product images do not influence my purchasing decisions.	
Q8	I am more likely to make a decision after reading reviews that address specific concerns about the product.	Fernandes et al., 2022
Q9	User-uploaded photo reviews influence my decisions more than long text-based reviews.	Goes et al. (2020), Risselada et al. (2018)
Q10	For unfamiliar products, I rely more on visual indicators and ratings than on detailed reviews	Goes et al. (2020), Risselada et al. (2018)

Q11	When evaluating unfamiliar products, I look for clear evidence in reviews, such as before-and-after photos or verified results.	Goes et al. (2020), Risselada et al. (2018)
Q12	Products presented with a focus on design and emotions appeal to me more	Mainardes et al.,

Note. This table presents a set of Pre–focus group Likert-type questions items adapted from existing literature and developed to explore how users perceive and respond to various digital cues encountered during online shopping. The Resource column indicates the research that has been adopted for each statement. These items are intended for use in qualitative analysis to improve and support the main methodological findings of the study.

The items have been drawn from established literature as adapted and customized for the context of this research. While inspired by existing theoretical frameworks and the thematic categorization compiled by Sergeeva et al. (2023), the application of these themes has been customized. In the initial coding process, this thesis relied on the thematic categorization introduced by Sergeeva et al. (2023), who identified a set of e-shopping cues such as ratings and reviews, product descriptions, refund policies, and discount indicators. These predefined categories served as a guiding framework for structuring the first round of coding. Like how Sergeeva et al. used established themes to map online shopping cues before conducting a deeper analysis, this thesis applied their coding scheme as a reference point to organize the initial transcription data. However, the themes in this thesis were not adopted as whole. Instead, they were adapted and customized for the context of Turkish e-commerce platforms. The descriptive results show that participants expressed the strongest agreement with questions 4, 6, and 10. These statements emphasized reviews included detailed experiences, user-uploaded photos, or specific concerns about the product. Such findings are consistent with existing literature that highlights the persuasive role of detailed information and visual evidence in reducing uncertainty and strengthening trust (Park et al., 2014; Fernandes et al., 2022). Similarly, question 8 also reached high agreement, as participants valued reviews addressing specific concerns. By contrast, the strongest disagreement was observed for question 1, which related to time-limited offers, was largely rejected as an important trust cue. This diverges from earlier studies which suggest that scarcity can increase urgency and perceived value (Figl & Friedrich, 2020). Instead, participants viewed such cues with skepticism, especially for high-involvement categories like cosmetics.

Considering the discussion flow, introducing the Pre-focus group Likert-type questions before the discussions helped reduce initial hesitation and encouraged participants to articulate their thoughts through self-reflection. After completing the Pre-focus group Likert-type questions, participants were introduced to a scenario.

Although the present analysis did not apply the Values and Lifestyles (VALS) segmentation, the framework offers a coherent way to extend interpretation of the Pre-focus group Likert-type questions data in future work. VALS classifies consumers into psychographic categories such as Innovators, Thinkers, Believers, Achievers, Strivers, Experiencers, Makers, and Survivors (Mitchell, 1983). Using VALS would connect participants' evaluations of popularity cues, scarcity, badges, consumer reviews with photos, and emotion or design appeal to broader lifestyle orientations and decision tendencies. In future studies, this mapping could be used to test whether distinct psychographic groups weigh digital cues differently when judging unfamiliar products.

3.4 Data Analysis Approach

After holding all the focus group sessions, the full audio recording was imported into Adobe Premiere Pro for preliminary editing. This step was necessary to enhance audio clarity. A noise-reduction filter was applied to eliminate background hiss and ambient disruptions such as air-conditioning hums and distant hallway sounds. The audio that was not directly related to the focus group discussion, including casual pre-session conversations and post-session farewells, was trimmed. This was also necessary to maintain the privacy and anonymity of the participants as their discussion related to their identities and political opinions. It is important to note that recordings began only after

participants signed and delivered the informed consent forms (See Appendix D), which explicitly indicated that the recordings would encompass only the focus group discussions.

The final audio was then uploaded to Sonix.ai and selected for its high accuracy in Turkish transcription at the time of the study. Considering the budgetary concerns and the application fee, only the moderator's opening question to the final participant response of each session was submitted for transcription in order to manage costs. Regarding the preference of Sonix.ai, it is true that the service may not guarantee the highest accuracy compared to others. However, the researcher took proactive measures by reviewing all the transcriptions while listening to the recordings.

The transcription stage is the beginning of the thematic analysis process. It involves transcribing the data and becoming familiar with its content. Recording and initial transcripts are carefully examined during this stage to identify preliminary themes and significant segments (Naeem et al., 2023). Recurring language patterns, expressions of uncertainty, and early thematic impressions were noted while reading the transcriptions.

The coding process was carried out in two phases. The first phase involved assigning initial codes based on the content of the data. The second phase focused on grouping these initial codes into broader categories.

Each participant completed a Pre-focus group Likert-type questions at the beginning of the session. Because many participants lacked a user interface design, psychology, or

user experience background, these questions aimed to establish a foundational understanding of key discussion concepts. This decision encouraged participants to consider their previous experiences and shopping habits before the discussion started. Therefore, they aimed to feel more confident about sharing their experience since they had already thought about it and found it easy to remember during discussions.



Table 4*Theme List*

Theme	Code	Description	Adopted from
Information Quality	Detailed Product Description	Presence of additional written information about features like material, origin, or usage that support consumer decision-making.	Sergeeva et al.,
Visual Presentation	Visual and Layout Cues	The way information is structured or designed visually on the interface, such as image resolution, badge indicators, and review format.	Sergeeva et al., 2023; Yang et al.,
User Motivation	Product Involvement	Consumers' inherent interest or relevance of the product based on personal needs or values.	Zaichkowsky, 1994
	Prior Knowledge	User's background knowledge or past experience with the product, aiding evaluation under uncertainty.	Chiou et al., 2018; Engel et al.,

Social Influence and Trust	Ratings and Reviews	Review content and scoring by other users that affect consumer trust and reduce perceived risk.	Sergeeva et al., 2023
	Trust Toward E-Retailer	Consumers' perception of the trustworthiness and credibility of the online platform or seller.	Kaplan & Nieschwietz, 2003
Managing Uncertainty and Perceived Risk	Uncertainty Avoidance & Dissonance Reduction	Users' psychological need to avoid ambiguity or regret through extra verification or confirmation-seeking.	Engel et al., 1993; Zhou, 2014
Brand Value	Brand value	Intrinsic perspectives consumers have about a particular brand through the consumption experience of the brand	Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Punj & Hillyer, 2004)

During the coding process, a hybrid approach that combines deductive and inductive strategies applied. The coding process was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, initial codes were assigned based on the content of the data. The analysis began with a deductive framework, using themes and subthemes adapted from existing literature as a structured guide for the initial round of coding. For example, the code Product information, adopted from Sergeeva et al. (2023), was applied in the early stages and later refined into the subtheme Message and Argument Quality under the broader theme Information Quality. The second phase involved categorizing these initial codes into more detailed categories to enable a thorough analysis of the data. At the same time, an inductive strategy was employed to capture new insights emerging directly from participants' discussions (Thomas, 2006). For instance, participants frequently raised the issue of Political views in relation to their online shopping experiences, a dimension not addressed in the deductive framework. This finding was therefore incorporated as the theme Sociopolitical Identity.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction to Findings

Real product listings from major e-commerce platforms were used during the focus group sessions to initiate assumption-based scenario conversations and gather authentic responses. The goal was to examine how participants interpret and prioritize different digital cues, especially when evaluating unfamiliar cosmetics market products. Based on these discussions, six main themes were identified. While not all sub-themes were directly quoted, they were considered relevant within the broader categories. In particular, the roles of cognitive strategies and motivational factors emerged in connection with themes like trust, review credibility, and visual presentation.

Beyond the planned scope of the study, participants also raised other concerns during the discussions. These concerns did not fall directly within the deductive codes but added an inductive approach and valuable context. For example, participants discussed that external influences also shaped trust, including brand sponsorships and political affiliations. Some participants expressed more confidence in brands that were visible in national

sponsorships or seen supporting public institutions. These associations gave them the impression of better management and stronger accountability. At the same time, political identity played a surprising role in shopping behavior.

Several participants shared that they avoided shopping on Trendyol, even when it offered attractive deals. Their hesitation came from perceiving the platform as aligned with a particular political view. In these cases, personal values and political preferences affected purchase decisions. This is especially relevant given the politically charged atmosphere in Türkiye at the time of the study. These observations suggest that for some consumers, shopping choices are closely tied to social and political identity.

4.2. Presentation of Themes

4.2.1 Theme 1: Information Quality

This theme focuses on the product information presented in online reviews and product descriptions. The quality of this information influences how consumers understand, evaluate, and trust what they read, which shapes their final decisions. When the information is clear and thorough, it helps reduce uncertainty and provides a foundation for forming objective perceptions of a product.

Sub-themes in this category include the role of clarity, depth, and credibility in reviews. Participants paid close attention to how well a product was described and how convincingly user experiences were communicated. These preferences reflect the

importance of what Wang and Strong (1996) describe as intrinsic and representational information quality.

A particularly revealing insight came from Participant 3 in Focus Group 5: "I always read the lowest-rated reviews first. I want to see the worst-case scenario." This behavior was an intentional cognitive effort to discover potential problems before purchasing. Participant 3 focused on user generated content to avoid disappointment. Such behavior reflects a high level of motivation and cognitive effort, characteristic of central route processing. In this manner, consumers engage deeply with the information because the decision feels important and carries some uncertainty (RQ1a, RQ1b).

Participants also expressed a strong preference for detailed and expressive reviews. Comments that simply stated "It arrived, thank you" were not seen as helpful. As Participant 2 in Focus Group 1 put it, "I want details—did it work? How did it feel?" In that case, participants required concrete, experience-based information that could guide their decision. Reviews need to be supported by real experiences and clear, valuable content (RQ1c).

Participant 3 in Focus Group 3 provided another example of this search for evidence. They looked for reviews that addressed specific concerns, such as "whether the product really thickens the hair or just looks like it does." This shows a clear demand for product-specific validation, not just overall satisfaction. Such a careful evaluation process requires effort and reflects a deep interest in whether the product truly delivers its promises (RQ1c).

Participants also found the Q&A sections of product pages important. Participant 2 in Focus Group 3 explained, “You can learn other things about the seller.” This section was an indicator of whether the seller was present, attentive, and professional. When sellers responded to questions clearly and promptly, it increased the participant’s trust as stated. At the same time, participants were alert to the possibility of manipulation. The same participant expressed skepticism about comments that appeared to be written by the brand. This also reflects on ability to critically evaluate the source of information and distinguish between genuine feedback and marketing content (RQ1c).

Although the number of reviews could quickly indicate popularity, participants often went beyond this initial impression. Participant 3 in Focus Group 3 described how they compared numerical ratings across platforms, such as a 4.2 rating for a seller versus a 3.9 for a product and considered the difference in the number of reviews between Trendyol and Hepsiburada. Therefore, participants mostly analyzed ratings as part of a broader effort to assess trustworthiness. This shows that even quantitative data, when viewed by motivated consumers, can support deeper, more careful decision-making (RQ1d).

4.2.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Detailed Product Description

This section explores how the presence and quality of additional written information, such as material, origin, or usage details, combined with supporting visuals, influence consumer decision-making. Participants repeatedly expressed a preference for product descriptions that were both detailed and visually supported. Participant 1 (Focus Group 2) valued "Trendyol's product description, including how to apply the product, and had

'before and after' photos," explaining, "That helps me understand what I am buying." The participant actively pursued specific, step-by-step instructions and visual cues to evaluate the product's utility (RQ1a).

In contrast, the lack of clear and professional presentation of textual and visual information damaged participants' trust and willingness to engage. Participant 4 (Focus Group 5) criticized Hepsiburada's product page, stating, "It just had one filtered photo and a short description. It did not feel professional." While the comment may appear aesthetic, it reflects a deeper concern with the quality of messaging and the strength of argument. Vague or poorly designed descriptions, especially those accompanied by generic or filtered visuals, failed to function as persuasive content. They were seen as weak arguments, triggering either skepticism or disengagement (RQ1c) and often pushing participants to seek more reliable sources of information.

Conflicting information between seller descriptions and user reviews further challenges consumer trust and increased cognitive processing. Participant 3 (Focus Group 4) explained, "Sometimes the seller's info and the user reviews contradict each other. That makes me wonder who to trust." Such contradictions led to investing more mental effort in resolving the conflict through third-party research. These inconsistencies became arguments in themselves, calling the reliability of the information into question and disrupting the flow of peripheral persuasion. This intensified central route processing (RQ1b, RQ1c).

Participants also looked for visual aids that clearly illustrate application steps, color options, or use scenarios. Descriptions that were poorly formatted, grammatically flawed, or incomplete, particularly on Hepsiburada, were often interpreted as signs of unprofessionalism. Participant 3 (Focus Group 5) compared the platforms, noting that "Trendyol had a full list of what comes in the box, but Hepsiburada did not even say if the sponge is included." This lack of clarity was not dismissed as a minor oversight. Rather, it was seen as a gap in argumentation, undermining the perceived trustworthiness of the seller credibility and reducing the consumer's confidence in the purchase.

Interestingly, participants did not always engage with every detail, such as long ingredient lists or product origin, unless it was personally relevant. However, when prior concerns were present, such as allergies or authenticity, participants became more attentive and looked at those specific details. This indicates that central route processing is selectively activated, depending on the consumer's motivation and perceived relevance (RQ1a, RQ1b).

4.2.2 Theme 2: Visual Presentation

This theme considers how image quality and interface design shape the user experience and affect consumers' willingness to engage with product information. It focuses on the visible, surface-level features and mental shortcuts that drive consumers to judge products and reviews, often without deep analysis quickly.

Cues such as image resolution, badges, review formats, and overall site design function as powerful heuristics. These cues help consumers immediately understand product quality, authenticity, and perceived platform professionalism. However, some visual elements go beyond superficiality and act as persuasive arguments encouraging more thoughtful engagement and central route processing (RQ1c).

Participant 3 (Focus Group 1) said, “The photos on Hepsiburada looked like they were from a drop shipping site, random images gathered from everywhere.” These types of visuals served as negative cues that damaged trust. In contrast, Participant 4 (Focus Group 2) commented on Trendyol’s use of “before-and-after pictures,” which showed an effort to demonstrate results, even if imperfect. This attempt at transparency helped build trust. Such images provided meaningful arguments supporting product claims (RQ1c).

Website design also contributed to quick impressions. Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) noted, “Trendyol’s interface looks modern and organized. Hepsiburada feels outdated and not professional.” These statements exemplify some participants form quick judgments based on aesthetics. A clean, well-organized layout acted as a shortcut to inferring professionalism and reliability, without needing detailed investigation (RQ1a).

Design elements like badges and video previews further supported these impressions. Participant 2 (Focus Group 2) shared, “I saw a badge that 47 people had this in their cart. That gives me a feeling that it is a popular item.” This reflects social proof as a mental shortcut—seeing that others are interested creates a sense of reassurance. Similarly, even

if not fully watched, the presence of a video gave participants the impression that more effort had been invested in the listing. Participant 2 (Focus Group 2) described this as “thoughtfulness.” Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) stated, “If a company invests in design, I trust they also care about the product.” This suggests that polished visuals can imply broader care and credibility (RQ1c).

At the same time, visuals were not accepted uncritically. Participant 3 (Focus Group 4) and Participant 1 (Focus Group 4) expressed doubts about “before-and-after” images that looked overly edited. One said, “They are more convincing, but I could not be sure. Who knows what will come?” Here, visuals shifted from being simple cues to becoming the arguments. Participants actively questioned their authenticity. When visuals appeared fake or heavily filtered, participants used central route processing to assess their credibility (RQ1b, RQ1c).

Participants also valued visuals that showed realistic use or step-by-step application. These helped reduce uncertainty. On the other hand, busy or disorganized page layouts were viewed negatively. Participant 1 (Focus Group 3) said, “I prefer the cleaner look of Hepsiburada, even if it lacks details,” over “too many boxes and pop-ups on Trendyol.” This shows that visual clutter can interfere with quick judgments and more thoughtful evaluations (RQ1a).

Furthermore, participants frequently evaluated how much and what kind of information the visuals presented by the seller. They generally liked the 'step-by-step' and 'before-and-after' visuals.

Participant 3: Visuals do influence me. For example, on Trendyol, when this product is listed, everything from the photo to the overall design looks cheap and careless, as if no effort was put into it. People might think the product is good and worth using if presented more aesthetically.

Participant 5: What exactly do you mean by "put effort into it"?

Participant 3: Like the images, the photos... Even the background pattern they use matters.

Participant 5: Were you expecting something like a mock-up?

Participant 4: Maybe just a photo taken from a better angle.

Participant 5: So you are not asking for a plain white background?

Participant 3: No, but also things like the environment, lighting, design... The colors are black and white—it just looks very plain.

Participant 2: I do not care much about the design.

Participant 5: I found it simple. It did not bother me. However, sure, a mock-up might have looked nicer.

Participant 3: But look, brands like Maybelline do not present lipsticks like that. There are background visuals, and when it is a mascara, they include an eye image too. You know?

Participant 2: But when buying this, you already know it is not Maybelline.

Participant 3: Still, it might have sold more if presented better. Who knows?

This discussion among participants illustrates how product visuals and interface aesthetics function as peripheral cues that shape initial consumer judgments. Participant 3 highlights that poor imagery, unappealing backgrounds, and a lack of visual context creates a perception of low quality, stating that a more aesthetically pleasing design might have increased its appeal and sales. This reflects reliance on peripheral route processing. Participants 5 and 4 discuss further into what effort means, leading to mentions of environment, lighting, and color choices. These visual attributes are interpreted as signals of a brand's credibility and professionalism (RQ1a). However, not

all participants process these cues similarly. Participants 2 and 5 express indifferences, suggesting that for them, peripheral cues hold less persuasive power, possibly due to higher product involvement or skepticism toward surface indicators (RQ1a, RQ1b).

4.2.3 Theme 3: User Motivation

This theme explores the internal factors driving consumers to actively seek and process product-related information. These intrinsic motivations shape how consumers engage with product descriptions, reviews, and other content. The sub-themes in this category focus on interest in a product and prior knowledge. These internal drivers help explain why some users invest more cognitive effort in evaluating complex information and are more receptive to persuasive arguments when the content is perceived as relevant. As Petty and Cacioppo (1986) point out in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, motivation and ability are prerequisites for central route processing. These are shaped by situational and personal factors, such as the perceived importance of the message, the individual's tendency to enjoy thinking deeply, access to multiple sources, and a sense of responsibility when evaluating information (Lien, 2002) (RQ1a, RQ1c).

4.2.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Product Involvement

When products were seen as personally relevant, especially in the cosmetics market category, participants clearly tended to seek more detailed evaluations. Participant 1 (Focus Group 3) stated, "If it is something I will put on my face, I need to know how others used it and their experience." Similarly, Participant 1 (Focus Group 5) stated, "When I buy something cosmetic, especially a face cream or powder, I read the details and how people use it." These statements show that participants actively search for real

user experiences and detailed content. When personal relevance is high, this kind of effortful process reflects the central route described in the ELM, where users are motivated to reduce uncertainty and evaluate product suitability thoroughly (RQ1c).

Product involvement also played a role in determining where participants chose to shop. When a product's perceived risk or value was high, many expressed hesitations about purchasing from online platforms. Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) said, "I would never buy an expensive item like a phone or gold from these sites. The risk is too high." These high-stakes scenarios called for strong arguments and signs of trustworthiness. When those were perceived as missing, participants often preferred physical stores to examine the product and consult with sales staff. Participant 1's (Focus Group 1) preference for shopping at Sephora, a high-end cosmetic retailer, when buying gifts or skincare items, shows a preference for more controlled and reliable settings when involvement is high.

One particularly compelling example comes from Participant 1 (Focus Group 5), who initially noticed a negative cue in a product description. They realized a shampoo contained sulfate, which they typically avoided. However, they went on to say, "It was good. It was also good for hair loss." The participant's personal concern about hair loss prompted a deeper evaluation of the product's benefits, eventually outweighing the initial negative impression. This case demonstrates how high involvement can push consumers to reconsider and reprocess information. As a result, the participants changed their initial attitude and maintained a positive opinion afterward (RQ1c).

In summary, perceived product relevance is central to how consumers process information. When highly involved, users are more likely to engage in deep cognitive evaluation and seek strong, relevant arguments before making decisions.

4.2.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Prior Knowledge

This section examines how a consumer's prior knowledge or experience with a product aids their evaluation under uncertainty. Prior knowledge increases the information stored in memory (Engel et al., 1993), shaping a participant's ability to understand the significance of specific product attributes. While a lack of familiarity may lead to reliance on peripheral cues, it can motivate consumers to engage more deeply with central route processing (RQ1a, RQ1c).

When participants encountered products, they had never used before, such as Topaxx Medium Brown Hair and Beard Thickening & Root Concealer Powder, they often tried to make sense of them by drawing analogies to more familiar products. Participant 4 (Focus Group 2) stated, "I have never heard of this product, but since it is powder, I assume it works like setting powder or dry shampoo." This demonstrates a familiarity heuristic, a form of peripheral processing where consumers transfer knowledge from related products to reduce uncertainty (RQ1a). Such mental shortcuts are especially common when direct, detailed information is absent or difficult to interpret.

Participants also drew on indirect experience or previous brand interactions. Participant 3 (Focus Group 5) remarked, "I have used this brand's other products. That makes me more open to trying something new from them." In this case, the participant's familiarity

with the brand led to increased openness toward unfamiliar products in the brand's lineup. This reflects a brand heuristic, where positive past experiences reduce the need for detailed analysis of a new item (RQ1c). Similarly, social proof shaped consumer confidence. Participant 2 (Focus Group 4) noted, "I have seen this in someone's cart, and I know that influencer's skin tone is like mine, so I trust their choice." Trust in the influencer and perceived similarity made the participant feel confident without extensive product research (RQ1c). Participant 1 (Focus Group 3) provided another example: "I trust my experience. I have used products like this before, and if the texture seems familiar, I feel more confident." These statements illustrate how consumers rely on familiar categories, trusted sources, or sensory experiences as quick decision aids without concrete product knowledge.

However, lacking prior knowledge did not always result in superficial processing. Sometimes, it triggered an increase in seeking more detailed information. Participant 3 (Focus Group 2) stated, "I did not know what this was, so I went straight to comments and videos." This response reflects a shift from peripheral to central route processing. When general heuristics were insufficient, participants became more motivated to better engage with reviews and media content to understand unfamiliar products (RQ1a, RQ1c).

The conversation in Focus Group 1 illustrates this shift. Participant 1 initially used review volume comparisons on Trendyol and Hepsiburada to judge the product as average. This may seem like a peripheral response. However, the discussion evolved when Participant 2 (Focus Group 1) noted, "There were 43 comments on Trendyol and

only five on Hepsiburada." This type of numerical comparison served as a shortcut and a way to build a basic evaluative argument. Participants tried to draw meaningful conclusions from available data, even if incomplete. This adaptive strategy shows how consumers may use even minimal information analytically when deeper evaluation is needed (RQ1c).

In summary, prior knowledge plays a dual role in online product evaluation. It can either simplify decisions through familiar cues or increase motivation to process information more thoroughly. Participants who lack specific product knowledge often compensate by relying on analogies, brand associations, and social proof. However, when these cues are insufficient, they may actively seek comments, reviews, and product videos to understand product-related information (RQ1a, RQ1c).

4.2.4 Theme 4: Social Influence and Trust

Where direct product experience is limited prior to purchase, consumers often depend on the experiences and opinions of others and the perceived credibility of the platform itself. This theme explores how consumer-generated content and the reputation of e-commerce platforms shape consumer confidence and reduce perceived risk. Theme emphasizes the role of external signals and mental shortcuts that allow users to quickly assess trust and product reliability without engaging in extensive cognitive processing (RQ1b, RQ1c).

Within the ELM, trust-related elements may function as central or peripheral cues.

Arguments about authenticity or policies can act as central cues. In contrast, design or

badges can serve as peripheral cues (Yang et al., 2006). This distinction shows that building trust online has multiple layers, as arguments and appearance contribute to consumer trust (RQ1c).

4.2.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Ratings and Reviews

This section explores how user-generated ratings and reviews influence consumer trust and perceived risk in online shopping. The analysis reveals that consumers often begin by relying on numerical scores and the volume of reviews as peripheral cues, drawing on social proof and consensus heuristics. However, when sufficiently motivated, or when these initial cues are ambiguous or insufficient, they shift toward central route processing, critically assessing the quality and authenticity of review content to reduce uncertainty and form more robust attitudes (RQ1b, RQ1c).

Participants consistently demonstrated an initial reliance on the quantity of reviews and average ratings as quick indicators of product credibility. Participant 2 (Focus Group 1) noted, “Trendyol had 43 reviews; Hepsiburada had only 5. That is not enough for me to trust the product.” This response reflects the use of social proof as a heuristic. In that case, review volume functions as a representative for product popularity and reliability. Similarly, Participant 3 (Focus Group 1) observed, “If only five people gave it 3.2, that already looks like a problem,” indicating how data paired with a low score triggers immediate skepticism. The desire for consensus also emerged as a heuristic strategy. As Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) explained, “Even if some reviews are bad, if more people wrote, I trust the general average.” In such cases, participants formed attitudes based on

the perceived collective judgment and social proof to minimize the need for deeper evaluation.

However, the analysis also revealed that participants were not limited to peripheral processing. When cues like review volume sparked further interest or when contradictions emerged, consumers transitioned into a more elaborate evaluation. Focus Group 3 illustrated this shift clearly. Participant 1 (Focus Group 3) preferred Trendyol, emphasizing, “more reviews [are] better for me to examine.” The motivation to explore a broader pool of opinions indicates a readiness for central processing. Participant 2 (Focus Group 3) supported this view, stating, “The more people evaluate, the more accurate you get,” but then added a critical layer: “Because usually brands make special comments to increase the number of comments.” This statement reflects concern with the authenticity of reviews, suggesting that participants were counting reviews and evaluating their source and trustworthiness (RQ1c).

Participant 3 (Focus Group 3) further compared seller and product ratings across platforms. They noted that “the seller on Trendyol has 4.2 stars. This is very important, but the product rating is 3.9,” contrasting it with Hepsiburada’s “five evaluations” and a 3.2 rating. From this, they concluded that “Trendyol is more reliable.” Such comparative numerical reasoning reflects more than surface-level interpretation. It demonstrates that consumers are willing to engage cognitively with numerical data to build arguments regarding product quality and platform credibility (RQ1c).

Participants also assessed the quality of visual content in reviews. Participant 4 (Focus Group 5) criticized “very irrelevant photos,” such as someone merely photographing an empty package. Participant 2 (Focus Group 5) added, “It is absurd that they approve without checking.” These comments show that consumers evaluate the presence of images and relevance as contributing to the review’s credibility. Poorly moderated or uninformative visuals were seen as weakening the argument strength of the review, prompting a more discerning approach to review overall content (RQ1c).

In conclusion, user-generated ratings and reviews influence decision making by both serving as peripheral and central cues. When participants are motivated by inconsistencies, they shift toward central route processing. This involves a deeper assessment of review authenticity, numerical comparisons, and message quality.

4.2.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Trust Toward E-Retailer

This section explores how consumers perceive the trustworthiness and credibility of online platforms and sellers. According to Kaplan and Nieschwietz (2003), trust toward an e-tailer refers to the degree to which an online seller is seen as reliable and honest. This involves an evaluation of the seller’s past actions and consistency. Participants frequently assessed trust in different contexts by checking seller information, brand visibility, and past buyer feedback (RQ1b).

Discussions about the product Topaxx Medium Brown Hair and Beard Thickening & Root Concealer Powder illustrate this process well. When participants saw that the product was sold by a third-party vendor rather than the official manufacturer, they

thought that is important in determining whether to proceed with a purchase. These evaluations were not limited to individual products but extended to the platforms themselves. Participants drew on both current and past experiences to assess how much confidence they had in Trendyol and Hepsiburada.

Participant 1: I noticed something — in the reviews, there are only product photos, but no one shared photos after actually using the product.

Participant 2: I think there were some on Trendyol.

Participant 1: Only one person had uploaded a photo of just their face. But I don't really trust that either, nor the seller's photos. There are things that should look more realistic.

Participant 3: But anyway, most sellers buy fake reviews for advertising. And those are really obvious. I mean, everyone writes the same review, using the exact same words. Here it didn't look too much like that, but I'm not sure.

Participant 4: That's why looking at the worst reviews is one of the most reliable things to do when buying something.

Participant 2: I also sort the reviews by newest first. Because usually they can't delete the newest ones. Sometimes they approve reviews first and then later delete them. Since they can't directly remove the newest ones, the low-rated ones at the top feel more real. Older reviews don't show that as much — maybe one or two low-star ratings. But usually, the sellers delete most of the low ratings. (Focus Group 5)

This sub-theme also includes the concept of source credibility, which Zhou (2014) defines as the degree to which a website or seller appears knowledgeable, honest, and reliable. Participants judged these qualities based on visible indicators such as seller ratings, review content, and familiarity with the platform. Opinions varied across participants, but most used basic comparison points to decide which platform or seller seemed more dependable. The credibility of eWOM, meaning the believability of online

reviews (Floh, Koller, & Zauner, 2013), was also an important factor. When participants recognized a platform or heard about it from others, they were more likely to feel confident in its reliability. This trust is closely linked to “site awareness,” Park et al. (2003), familiarity with a brand contributes to fast decision-making. Additionally, participants associated a modern, organized interface with trust, indicating that design and structure reinforced perceptions of platform credibility.

Trust was also shaped by participants' emotional responses and lived experiences. While Trendyol was seen as more compatible with cosmetics and fashion-related items, Hepsiburada was trusted more for electronics. Participants described having different trust levels for different product categories depending on how each platform performed in those areas. Participant 1 from Focus Group 1 expressed this clearly: “I trust Hepsiburada for electronics, but for cosmetics or clothes, Trendyol feels more reliable.” This shows how experience and platform specialization helped form quick judgments without further consideration (RQ1b).

On the other hand, negative personal experiences prompted participants to take a more careful and detailed approach. Participant 2 (Focus Group 1) recalled an order: “They gave my money back, but the product never came. It makes me think twice now.” This led to a long-term shift in behavior, with the participant stating they now preferred to shop in physical stores. Even a single failed transaction changed their entire perception of the platform. When trust is broken, participants examine each new experience more carefully and rebuilding that trust becomes difficult.

Positive experiences, on the other hand, helped strengthen long-term confidence.

Features like easy return policies, fast delivery, or secure packaging added to users' trust in the platform. One participant described feeling reassured by knowing they could always receive a refund. While this may seem like simple comfort, trust, in this case, was not based on appearance alone but on repeated examples of good service.

Participants also evaluated trustworthiness at the level of individual sellers, especially when the same product was available from different sources. Participant 1 (Focus Group 4) explained, "The product's seller is the manufacturer on Trendyol, but not on Hepsiburada. Apart from that, I looked at the sellers' reliability. At first, Hepsiburada does not look bad. It has a 9.9 rating, but there are not many reviews. That is why I would buy it from Trendyol." This statement shows that even strong ratings are not always convincing unless enough customer feedback supports them. Being the manufacturer gave the Trendyol seller more credibility, and the larger number of reviews made that decision feel safer (RQ1c).

Participants were also selective about the content of the reviews they read. They noticed that when user-uploaded photos were not helpful. For example, Participant 4 (Focus Group 5) said, "Someone opened an empty package and took a picture," and Participant 2 (Focus Group 5) replied, "It is absurd that they approve without checking." These comments reflect expectations about quality and relevance in user feedback (RQ1c).

4.2.5 Theme 5: Managing Uncertainty and Perceived Risk

This theme addresses the strategies consumers use when facing incomplete or ambiguous information. In online shopping consumers often seek reassurance to ease feelings of doubt or avoid regret. This theme explores the need to reduce ambiguity, and the conscious efforts people make to confirm their choices before finalizing a purchase (RQ1b).

4.2.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Uncertainty Avoidance and Dissonance Reduction

This sub-theme focuses on consumers' psychological drive to reduce ambiguity and potential regret by seeking additional information. According to Engel et al. (1993) and Zhou (2014), individuals uncomfortable with uncertainty seek confirmation before making decisions. Hofstede (1980) defines uncertainty avoidance as the degree to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations. In our focus groups, participants more sensitive to unclear product information, such as vague reviews or suspicious seller behavior, often increased their effort to verify claims before purchasing.

Price played a key role in shaping perceptions and behavior. As Lien et al. (2015) suggest, higher prices prompt more comparisons and involvement. Maslowska et al. (2017) argue that expensive products increase perceived risk and trigger deeper cognitive engagement. Some participants also felt responsible when shopping for friends or family, which encouraged a more thorough review of product details to protect others from potential risks (RQ1b).

Participants frequently showed concern when product descriptions were vague, photos seemed misleading, or sellers lacked credibility. Perceived risk was especially high for personal care items and expensive products. In these cases, participants were more likely to carefully evaluate and rely on detailed evidence before deciding.

Participant 3 (Focus Group 1) mentioned receiving a fabric completely different from what was expected, despite checking the reviews and photos. That situation left participants feeling misled and encouraged more cautious behavior in future shopping decisions.

Perceived risk also influenced participants' willingness to use specific platforms. Some avoided making expensive purchases online altogether. Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) said, "I would never buy a phone or gold from these places. I cannot trust them 100 percent when the money involved is high." When the stakes were high, participants looked for clear and convincing reasons to trust a platform. If those reasons were not found, they simply avoided the purchase. The same applies to products in the health and cosmetics market. Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) noted, "This is for the genital area — of course, it is risky. I would not take a chance unless the reviews were positive."

Participant 3 (Focus Group 1) expressed similar concerns about perfume, stating that it was difficult to know whether the product was original or fake. These examples show that high sensitivity to risk leads to more careful evaluation or complete avoidance (RQ1a).

To cope with risk, many participants relied on return policies. Participant 2 (Focus Group 1) said, "What is the worst that could happen? It is a reliable site, and I can return it if necessary — and I did." Participant 3 (Focus Group 1) also felt reassured by the return option: "Even if it does not fit or suit me, I can always send it back." These statements illustrate a common method of reducing doubt via reliable return policies. While some considered this a comfort, others considered it a key reason to trust the platform (RQ1c).

Participants also gathered comparative information to reduce uncertainty. Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) kept track of how many reviews the product had on Trendyol and Hepsiburada, saying, "I wrote down how much it got on both sides." Although they ultimately found the product average, this effort shows a desire to make a more informed and confident choice by comparing sources.

Price was another important factor in this decision-making process. Maslowska et al. (2017) states that high prices demand more attention and processing effort, while low prices reduce perceived risk. Participant 3 (Focus Group 2) said, "It is cheaper, its evaluations are cheaper, there are more, and there is a coupon." In this case, the combination of low prices, high review volume, and a discount offer made the decision easier. These cues created a feeling of reduced risk and increased appeal, especially for budget-conscious shoppers.

In summary, when participants face uncertainty, they try to manage it using various strategies. Prior negative experiences make them more cautious and more likely to

evaluate in-depth information. High-risk products or high prices require strong arguments that build trust. If these arguments are not convincing, participants avoid the purchase altogether. At the same time, features like return policies or discounts can reduce risk perception and increase the likelihood of purchase.

4.2.6 Theme 7: Brand Value

This theme examines how consumers form impressions of brand value based on experience, presentation, and perceived reputation. Brand value extends beyond the product, involving emotional connections, trust, and assumptions about quality. Even when users lack direct familiarity with a brand, they often hold strong opinions shaped by visual cues and social influence (RQ1c).

Some participants had platform preferences for specific product categories. Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) explained, “I trust Hepsiburada more for electronics. However, when it comes to cosmetics or fashion, Trendyol feels more reliable.” Site awareness in such cases helped guide choices quickly and confidently, based on what participants believed each platform did best.

Visual design played a significant role in shaping brand perception. Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) shared, “The UI design says a lot. Trendyol looks much more professional. Hepsiburada feels amateurish — not a real sales experience.” Participants interpreted a visually appealing design as a sign of operational quality and customer care. Participant 1 (Focus Group 1) added, “If a brand spends on good design, it shows they are better organized and serious about quality.”

Pre-existing attitudes toward brands also shaped behavior. In Focus Group 5, Participant 1 admitted, “Let me tell you from the start that I am prejudiced against Hepsiburada. Most likely it will be Trendyol.”. Participant 4 (Focus Group 5) mentioned that they still considered price and coupon availability, but ultimately preferred Trendyol. The decision was guided by peripheral cues (RQ1b).

In conclusion, brand value influences online behavior when consumers lack product knowledge. These judgments are often based on external cues like visual presentation, general reputation, and social familiarity. Strong design, category alignment, and consistent brand identity help platforms create trust and drive user preference.

Table 5*Components Examined by Participants Across Focus Groups*

Component	What Participants Focused On	Example Notes
Reviews & Ratings	Number of reviews, star rating, presence of photos/videos	Preferred reviews with photos; checked negative reviews first
Seller Information	Seller credibility, verified seller tag, communication in Q&A	Concerned about fake or expired products; valued responsive sellers
Badges & Labels	“Best Seller,” “Most Reviewed,” discount tags	Used badges to filter choices; but sometimes questioned their reliability
Refund & Return Policies	Ease of returning cosmetics, refund guarantees	More careful with sensitive products like intimacy foam

Platform Design	Layout, clarity of product page, information organization	Trust increased with clear, well-structured pages
Visual Content	Before/after images, usage routines, product packaging photos	Considered relatable visuals most persuasive
External Checks	TikTok, Skincharisma.com, ChatGPT	Used these to verify product claims and ingredients

Note. This table summarizes the main product and platform components participants examined during five focus groups (FG1–FG5).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

To summarize the key highlights, this thesis found ,based on participants’ inputs, that reviews and ratings were the most important cues guiding purchase decisions on Trendyol and Hepsiburada. Participants trusted reviews with photos and personal details the most, and they paid closer attention to negative reviews because these revealed risks. They relied on quick signals like star ratings or brand names for familiar products. They processed information more carefully for unfamiliar or risky products by reading reviews in detail, checking seller reliability, and considering refund policies. Trust was shaped by design and seller reliability, but also by cultural and political factors, such as boycott debates, which had an impact. Like intimate care items, sensitive products create more hesitation and require stronger trust signals than grooming products. A surprising finding was that participants sometimes chose Hepsiburada over Trendyol when they suspected counterfeits or expired cosmetics, showing that authenticity and safety can outweigh platform popularity.

This study examined how Turkish university students respond to digital cues when evaluating unfamiliar cosmetics market products on Trendyol and Hepsiburada. It used

the ELM to understand when participants prefer detailed information versus heuristic cues. Overall, participants took the central route to make decisions in focus groups. This thesis confirms much of what earlier studies have found about online reviews in e-commerce. Just as Park et al. (2014) and Huang et al. (2019) noted, reviews and ratings strongly influence purchase decisions because customers cannot test products online. The focus groups confirmed this: participants most trusted reviews with photos, details, and personal stories. This also supports Dwidienawati et al.'s (2020) idea that reviews reduce risk and act as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Participants valued reviews with photos or videos, trusted platforms with more reviews, and highly valued seller reliability. They also liked it when sellers were responsive in Q&A sections or product listings, which included extra visuals like videos.

The distinction between quantitative cues (ratings, number of reviews) and qualitative cues (text, photos) was also confirmed. Maslowska et al. (2017) explained that numbers often act as quick heuristics, while texts demand more effort. Participants in this study followed the same pattern. For unfamiliar cosmetics, they searched for negative reviews and photos to reduce risk, which agrees with Bo et al. (2023), who showed that reviewer identity and timing matter in shaping choices. Participants found it interesting that reviews contained detailed personal experiences, especially when they related to their own concerns.

The findings also confirm the predictions of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Participants used the peripheral route for familiar products, relying on star ratings or brand names. However, they switched to the central route for unfamiliar

products, carefully examining reviews, sellers, and refund policies. This supports Cooke et al. (2002) and Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2017), who argued that unfamiliar products depend strongly on context and presentation. However, this study contradicts the idea that unfamiliar products are always evaluated superficially. Instead, participants often engaged in central processing, especially when risks like counterfeit cosmetics were involved.

Trust also appeared as a central theme, as seen in Mayer et al. (1995), Xu and Liao (2020), and Trenevskaa (2023). Findings confirm that design quality and seller reliability build trust. However, it also adds that participants' trust was influenced by political views and boycott debates as new. This provided another perspective to existing research by showing that cultural and political contexts can be just as important for loyalty and preference.

A further contribution of this thesis is the analysis of controversial product categories. Wan and Sam's (2024) concept of "cross-review controversy" was confirmed in the case of Orginx Intim Foam, where participants were more cautious and demanded more substantial proof before buying. This supports Pires et al. (2006), who noted that health- and appearance-related products carry more risk. In contrast, grooming products such as hair and beard serums were not seen as controversial, and reviews were more straightforward and less uncertain.

A surprising finding of this thesis was how participants treated counterfeits and risks. When they suspected product-related problems on Trendyol, such as fake reviews,

counterfeit items, or expired cosmetics, many said they would rather trust Hepsiburada, even though it had far fewer reviews and ratings. The nature of the products involved can explain this shift. Items like cosmetics or intimate care products carry a higher sense of personal risk, so participants showed stronger uncertainty avoidance. They preferred a platform they associated with greater product authenticity, even if it offered less user feedback. Choosing Hepsiburada in these cases also reflects an effort to reduce cognitive dissonance, and trusting Hepsiburada allowed them to justify their decision as safer and more responsible.

Another surprising point was how strongly political views and social values influenced participants' shopping decisions. While it was expected that trust would be shaped mainly by design, reviews, or platform features, many participants described platforms' political image and public reputation as equally important. Associations with national events, boycott debates, and broader ideological perceptions often guided their choices, sometimes even more than their personal shopping experiences. This shows that beyond layout, features, and usability, the political and cultural positioning of e-commerce platforms can play a decisive role in shaping trust, loyalty, and preference.

A key difference in consumer decision-making is between familiar and unfamiliar products. Cooke et al. (2002) explain that “unfamiliar recommendations represent an important source of business” but also note that consumers often react negatively to them because they lack prior knowledge (p. 489). Their findings show that context and additional information can lead consumers to assimilate unfamiliar products with familiar ones or contrast them as very different. In comparison, familiar products are

judged more steadily since people already know what to expect. This is also supported by Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2017), who found that “consumers perceive unfamiliar products as more attractive and, consequently, of higher quality when products are placed in an attractive context than when they are placed in an unattractive context.” In contrast, “no differences in consumers’ perceived product attractiveness and perceived product quality exist for familiar products” (p. 242). Together, these studies suggest unfamiliar products depend strongly on presentation and context, while familiar ones are evaluated more independently through experience. Findings revealed that participants in this research also saw unfamiliar products as riskier, but rather than relying only on surface cues, they engaged in closer examination. When faced with cosmetics or personal care items they had never tried, they read reviews carefully, checked seller reliability, and considered refund policies before deciding. In contrast, familiar products were judged more quickly and with less effort. Participants often relied on brand recognition or past experience; even when negative reviews were present, they trusted what they already knew.

Orginx Intim Foam is a controversial product in the category of intimate care. Many people believe that personal issues, like sexual health, should stay private and not be discussed openly. In focus groups, people expressed their doubts about Orginx Intim Foam. They usually trust reviews and the credibility of the platform when making choices. In contrast, hair and beard serums are not seen as controversial. Grooming products typically do not spark debates or create divided opinions, making reviews clearer and less uncertain. This points out that products related to sex or intimate care often face cultural resistance because they bring private issues into public discussions,

making them harder to sell. Wan and Sam (2024) add that these products are prone to "cross-review controversy." This means that mixed consumer opinions make it harder for consumers to understand information and confidently decide to purchase. From a marketing viewpoint, this indicates that products like Orginx Intim Foam need careful positioning and stronger trust signals to ease hesitations. In contrast, products like Topaxx Medium Brown Hair and Beard Thickening & Root Concealer Powder can be sold more directly since they are unlikely to cause the same social or moral debate.

This thesis contributes to both academic studies and sectoral needs in e-commerce. Regarding an academic perspective, it shows how ELM can be applied to understand consumer behavior in Türkiye. By looking at cosmetics products, which are often difficult to evaluate without use, the thesis adds discussion about how people process cues in categories defined as experience goods. Unlike earlier works that rely on surveys and experiments in Western or Asian settings, this research uses focus groups to provide insights how consumers make sense of cues in everyday shopping situations. This provides a more grounded picture of how digital design components guide trust, risk perception, and purchase intentions.

Moreover, the findings offer practical solutions about what matters to consumers when deciding whether to trust cosmetics products. For this category, stricter government regulations on counterfeit prevention, more explicit ingredient labeling, and more accessible return policies are needed to reduce consumer risk perceptions and strengthen trust.

E-commerce platforms should invest in advanced fraud detection tools, verified-purchase tags, and stronger seller monitoring systems to reduce counterfeit and expired products. For brands and sellers, building trust requires clear product information, responsive customer service, and proactive communication with consumers. At the industry level, collaborations between brands, platforms, and consumer advocacy groups could establish shared standards for transparency in online reviews. This might include verified expert reviews, customer feedback, or industry-wide seals of approval for safety and authenticity. Encouraging ethical marketing practices, especially for controversial or sensitive products, will help reduce stigma and uncertainty while supporting informed consumer choices.

Another key insight is that consumers often rely on external information sources outside the platform before deciding. TikTok reviews, Skincharisma.com (for ingredient analysis), and even ChatGPT were mentioned in the focus groups as trusted external checks. This shows that e-commerce decisions are not limited to platform content but extend across digital ecosystems. Platforms and brands should recognize this multichannel evaluation process and adapt accordingly. For example, micro-influencer ads on TikTok can reach audiences who already seek product advice there, while expanding marketing and SEO strategies to ChatGPT can help capture consumers who use AI for product comparisons. In addition, providing a clear list of ingredients with their purposes in the product information can mirror the type of transparency users seek on external sites like Skincharisma, reducing the need to look elsewhere and strengthening credibility.

5.1 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Even though efforts are made to adhere to ethical standards, several additional considerations should be acknowledged. Focus group settings might involve group dynamics that can influence individual responses. Participants' contributions may have been shaped by the presence of others, particularly in discussions of sensitive hygiene products. Some participants may have moderated or withheld their accurate opinions in mixed-gender groups due to concerns about social judgment or discomfort. Also, the possibility of social desirability bias remains a known limitation of this method in mixed-gender groups. One of the main limitations is related to the method itself. The risk of group conformity, the potential dominance of more outspoken participants, and possible biases might be an issue to cover (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The group setting also might influence individual responses concerning personal care and intimate products. Participants might have felt they had to conform to perceived group norms. The risk of social desirability bias could not be eliminated.

Sonix.ai transcription was conducted with the highest transparency. Only the trimmed and content-relevant sections of the recordings were uploaded. It is important to note that the researcher took precautions to avoid uploading any informal or off-topic discussions to minimize identifiable content. The platform's data storage and processing infrastructure remain outside the researcher's control.

Another concern might be using real product listings and platform interfaces within a scenario. These materials were used solely for academic purposes to provide a realistic

context for the study. All examples were sourced from publicly available listings to reflect realistic shopping conditions.

Lastly, as the researcher who designed the scenario, selected the products, moderated the discussions, and conducted the analysis, personal background may have influenced the study. This includes deciding which products to present, how discussion questions were framed, and how participant responses were interpreted during coding. To reduce that influence, the study adopted multiple transcript readings and a structured codebook that included inductive and priori codes. However, the researcher's positionality and interpretive role remain and are acknowledged as limitations. This is also a limitation because the same individual was responsible for designing the scenario, moderating the focus groups, selecting products, and analyzing the transcripts. Although multiple readings, a structured coding process, and inductive and deductive techniques were employed to reduce the bias, thematic analysis inherently involves subjective judgments.

It is important to acknowledge that several limitations and challenges were encountered during the different phases of this study. These limitations are crucial when analyzing the findings and assessing their generalizability.

A significant challenge arose as the timing of the study overlapped with the ongoing student protests during the scheduled weeks. The protests included class cancellations and difficulty maintaining communication with participants. These events directly impacted the recruitment process, causing delays and many participant dropouts. To overcome this, sessions had to be rescheduled, and snowball sampling was used to fill

the remaining participant slots. Furthermore, the limited classroom availability restricted the range of possible time slots. Most sessions had to be scheduled during midday, which might have introduced fatigue for participants attending before or after class.

Another limitation is that participants may have relied on generalized attitudes rather than specific intentions without actual purchase intent or personal need. Additionally, the e-commerce listings can change frequently. This was evidenced in the final focus group session, where the comments of Orginx Intimate Foam for Genital Odor, Yeast, and Discharge Relief with Whitening Effect used in the scenario had been removed from its Trendyol listing. As a result, participants in that session could not engage with the different product review content as in earlier groups.

The study included mostly female participants, which restricts generalization. Male consumers or mixed groups may have responded differently, especially regarding grooming or general products. Future research should include more diverse samples.

5.2 Further Study

This research focuses on how Turkish university students perceive cues when shopping for cosmetics market products online. However, more research is needed to apply these findings across different demographics and product types. Future studies should consider diverse age groups, shopping platforms, and cultural contexts. Moreover, conducting longitudinal studies could also demonstrate how the influence of cues and trust in platforms changes over time, especially with updates in interface design or review

policies. The study did not address the role of emotions in decision-making, although some participants expressed emotional responses. Future research could investigate how emotional framing, tone, and design elements influence decision-making.

A key factor to consider is the political and social climate in Türkiye during the study. Most focus groups started with discussions about whether Trendyol or Hepsiburada was part of the national boycott. Interestingly, many participants said they would not choose the boycotted platform. This shows that trust in online platforms may depend on broader social and political views. Therefore, repeating this study in different demographic or cultural settings could provide insights.

Additionally, comparing user behaviors across different age groups would provide comparative insights regarding the effects of interface design and cue presentation. Future research could also examine the relationship between cues, sponsorship, and government regulations to build consumer trust. Some participants in this study noted that a brand's major sponsorship deals can affect how trustworthy or relatable it seems to consumers. Exploring how these outside factors interact with platform choice could support other aspects influencing online buying choices.

Future research can build on this thesis by examining how e-commerce platforms visually and structurally present digital cues that influence consumer trust and the selection of platforms. This investigation could be expanded by analyzing the specific impact of visual and design elements on perceptions of trust and credibility.

Additionally, it would be valuable to explore how platform features like review volume,

seller information, and refund policies affect consumers' initial judgments and influence their choice of platform.



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APPENDIX A. DUAL PROCESS HISTORY

The study of persuasion has a deep intellectual history that emerged from early philosophical explorations to more systematic research (Petty & Briñol, 2008). One of the earliest frameworks of persuasion is Aristotle's Rhetoric. Aristotle described three modes of persuasion: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. Ethos refers to the credibility and charisma of the speaker. When people engage with such a speaker, they are likely to trust them as they tend to believe such an individual is virtuous and knowledgeable (Aristotle, trans. 1867).

On the other hand, Pathos refers to the feelings that play a role in shaping decisions. Logos refers to logical reasoning with structured arguments and the presence of evidence to persuade (Aristotle, trans. 1867). Aristotle argued that the measurement that defines the effectiveness of a persuasion relies on using all three modes. So, they shape how an audience receives and interprets a message. As the pioneer, the early persuasion studies were rooted in this idea and often investigated isolated variables. These variables can be exemplified by discussing whether logic is more effective than emotion (Petty & Briñol, 2008,). Even though such isolation might be limiting, distinguishing between reason-based and emotion-based routes in modern dual-process theories is still illustrated and studied in different contexts. Considering the digital context, reviews can be categorized as actions (logical) or reactions (emotional) (Ullal et al., 2021). Moreover, while facts in reviews generally have more influence, emotions play a significant role in purchasing luxury and hedonic items (Ullal et al., 2021).

Furthermore, buying performance-based products seeks facts, whereas buying luxury products is more predisposed to emotions in reviews (Ullal et al., 2021). This study adopted the idea of Pathos and Logos and examined how facts versus emotions in reviews influence purchasing decisions regarding different product types like cosmetics market. The distinction between action and reaction also implicitly links to analytical versus heuristic processing (Ullal et al., 2021).

Similarly, the importance of visual appeal, Pathos, and reviewer expertise can also be Ethos in e-reviews for cosmetics market studied (Park & Jung, 2013). This study also added that the perceived objectivity and clarity, related to Logos, were associated with higher trust. This example also demonstrates that Aristotle's modes of persuasion continue to be relevant in the context of persuasion.

Regarding the online contexts, Ethos can be reflected in expert endorsements and verified purchase labels that establish credibility and trust. Moreover, Pathos emerges through emotionally charged elements that respond to users' concerns or aspirations. Therefore, user-generated image contents like before-and-after photos or reviews that reflect specific concerns or positive aspirations can be identified as Pathos. On the other hand, logos is present in the information and requires deliberate and analytical processing. Therefore, detailed written reviews, Q&A sections, and filtering options can be identified as Logos. One can interpret that the core idea of continuity of modes reflects the fundamental responses to credibility, emotion, and logic. Moreover, these responses remain somewhat consistent through time and medium.

Similarly, Freud's model of the psyche provides a framework that explains the internal conflict. There are three core psychological components: the Id, Ego, and Superego (Freud, 1923/1961). The Id operates on the maximum pleasure principle. Therefore, it is driven by instincts and constantly seeking immediate satisfaction (Freud, 1923/1962). On the other hand, the Ego acts as a moderator to balance these instincts with rational thought (Freud, 1923/1962). Lastly, the Superego is shaped by social norms and ethical standards (Freud, 1923/1962). As a result, these psychological components illustrate a constant tension between impulse, reason, and morality. Therefore, human decisions are rarely guided by logic alone. (Freud, 1923/1961).

Using this framework, consumers may face an internal conflict when evaluating unfamiliar cosmetics market products. On such occasions, the ID may be instantly attracted to visually engaging elements like photos and emotionally charged reviews. Therefore, the decision-making process might be driven by the desire for immediate satisfaction. On the other hand, the Superego might interpret cues like popularity badges or bestseller labels as indicators of socially approved choices. However, these cues might vary based on the values. For example, Vegan Product badges might also be a cue if the person is highly involved in such practices, regarding this as a societal norm. Furthermore, the Ego seeks to balance by searching for justification. These can be expert endorsements, mentioning specific concerns in reviews.

These conflicting internal components reflect the complexity of decision-making. As different parts of the psyche respond to different cues, the user may experience information overload or cognitive dissonance. As a result, individuals might be more

likely to rely on heuristics or mental shortcuts to resolve the tension. Overall, this presented conflict might help explain why the evaluation of unfamiliar products often might feel both emotionally charged and require a high cognitive effort.

However, early studies and thoughts did not consider how social interactions shape individuals or how people influence one another. Early theories mainly focused on how people interact in society; people as individuals remained unstudied. Epicurus's hedonistic philosophy is one of the earliest influences on Utilitarianism. He studied and classified desires into three types: natural and necessary desires, such as food, water, and shelter. Secondly, he described natural but unnecessary desires as luxurious living and vain desires like wealth, power, and fame (O'Keefe, 2010). He further argued that fulfilling natural and necessary desires leads to ataraxia, described as freedom from distress. However, excessive desire for unnecessary or vain desires can lead to dissatisfaction (O'Keefe, 2010). Epicurus's leading actor can be human motivations through this categorization of desire. Therefore, the messages presented by the cues can be aimed at different needs and desires.

As the means of Modern Utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill argued that actions can be morally right if they result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Mill, 1863/1966; Bentham, 1780). Mill defined happiness as "pleasure and the absence of pain," distinguishing between higher pleasures regarded as intellectual or moral, and lower pleasures regarded as physical or sensory (Mill, 1863/1966).

Bentham's Principle of Utility further proposed that decisions should be guided by a "hedonic calculus," where outcomes are assessed based on their ability to increase

pleasure and reduce pain (Bentham, 1780). Considering that view, effective persuasion should be driven by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain by framing benefits and risks (Bentham, 1780).

This idea is further explored by arguing that consumers browse online reviews for functional reasons, such as gathering practical information or for pleasure, such as enjoying the browsing experience (Park & Jung, 2013). This distinction between functional reasons can be described as utilitarian and pleasure as hedonic. Therefore, engaging with e-reviews directly relates to utilitarian principles of maximizing benefit/minimizing pain versus seeking pleasure. The study also highlighted that e-reviews are perceived as trustworthy and reduce perceived risk (Park & Jung, 2013). Considering that the target of this study is university students who are evaluating unfamiliar cosmetics market products, they most likely are not financially independent from their parents. Therefore, their decisions might be driven to minimize negative consequences, such as skin irritation, which causes more money to be spent on curing and wasted money. However, the decision might be driven by the desire to maximize positive outcomes. Therefore, users might be more sensitive to cues that reduce perceived risk or reinforce potential rewards. Therefore, cues that promise clear benefits can be more persuasive. In such contexts, users might prioritize cues that respond to pleasure or pain avoidance. When the risks are high, they may process this information more analytically rather than rely on heuristic information.

The mid-20th century marked a significant shift in persuasion research, moving from simple models to more complex understandings of cognitive processes (Petty & Briñol,

2008). The Yale approach to persuasion was among the earliest systematic studies in the field (Hovland et al, 1953, as cited in Petty and Briñol, 2008). The Yale approach study stated that attitude change occurs through a sequence of steps: attention, comprehension, learning, acceptance, and retention of a message (Hovland et al, 1953 qtd. in Petty and Briñol, 2008). Throughout this study, researchers adopted the main-effect view. According to this, they assumed that message quality or source credibility had a direct, unchanging impact on persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, later research by Festinger and Maccoby challenged this passive learning perspective of the Yale Approach (Festinger & Maccoby, 1964). They argued that receivers do not simply accept persuasive messages. However, they actively process them by generating their thoughts, counterarguments, or criticisms (Festinger & Maccoby, 1964). Their work revealed that distraction could reduce this internal resistance. Therefore, limiting the cognitive resources available for counterarguing will make persuasion more effective (Festinger & Maccoby, 1964). These findings shifted the focus towards the cognitive response approach to understand how individuals mentally react to a persuasive message (Perloff).

After being refined by Festinger and Maccoby, Yale's approach directly addresses how individuals actively engage or resist messages. The main finding of the refinement is that information overload can shift processing. If consumers encounter conflicting and multiple cues for unfamiliar cosmetics market products, they might experience a form of distraction or cognitive overload. This overload could reduce their ability to counterargue. Consequently, they might accept more available or evident cues, even if they are peripheral. This implies that information overload might push users towards less

effortful processing. Therefore, it might make them more sensitive to simpler cues like star ratings or popularity badges.

Empirical studies further support the impact of information overload in digital contexts. For instance, consumers face significant information overload from the volume of online reviews, leading them to selectively focus on reviews or ratings perceived as more credible or relevant (Chatterjee, 2001)

Cognitive Response Theory was introduced by Greenwald in 1968. The main contribution of this theory is the concept of counterarguing through mentally challenging a persuasive message by comparing new information to existing beliefs. If conflicts arise, individuals tend to generate counterarguments and resist persuasion (Greenwald, 1968). However, persuasion is more effective when individuals generate positive thoughts that support the message. However, many negative thoughts can lead to a boomerang effect by reinforcing pre-existing attitudes (Greenwald, 1968). The theory also explains that source credibility influences persuasion by shaping cognitive responses. For example, credible sources encourage positive thoughts (Greenwald, 1968).

Cognitive Response Theory reflects active mental processes involved in persuasion by generating thoughts and counterarguments. To contextualize for digital environments, users often lack prior knowledge to form strong pre-existing beliefs about unfamiliar cosmetics market products. Therefore, users might not have a strong basis for counterarguing when they encounter specific concerns. Instead, these concerns could

trigger negative cognitive responses because of the absence of positive experience, which might reduce the perceived credibility and result in increased resistance to purchase.

Principles of this theory are further supported as consumers resolve cognitive dissonance when faced with conflicting reviews by relying on overall ratings or dismissing outlier opinions (Chatterjee, 2001). Moreover, the study also found that consumers with strong cognitive affinity toward a particular product or retailer are less likely to be influenced by reviews that contradict their pre-existing beliefs. Furthermore, they tend to selectively focus on reviews that confirm their biases.

After understanding that persuasion variables could have varied and even contradictory effects led to the emergence of dual-process models in the 1980s (Petty & Briñol, 2008,). One of the contemporary theories of dual process persuasion is the ELM. The likelihood of elaboration is determined by motivation, described as the individual's desire to process a message that can be influenced by personal relevance, need for cognition (NFC), and accountability. (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) Moreover, ability is defined as cognitive resources, prior knowledge, and distractions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). One of the main aspects of ELM is its multiple functions postulate approach. This suggests that the same persuasion variable can play different roles depending on the level of cognitive engagement. (Petty and Briñol, 2008).

ELM demonstrates that increasing personal relevance enhances message processing, which leads to stronger persuasion with strong arguments, but greater resistance to weak

ones (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). In contrast, individuals are influenced by peripheral cues, such as celebrity endorsements, which might be of low relevance (Petty et al., 1983). Message repetition can reinforce strong arguments or increase skepticism toward weak ones (Cacioppo & Petty, 1979). Attitudes formed through the central route are more stable and resistant to counter-persuasion acts (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The ELM is crucial for understanding the cognitive strategies of users when processing digital cues for unfamiliar products. Motivation and ability are relevant for understanding how unfamiliarity impacts the prioritization of cues. For unfamiliar cosmetics market products, users might inherently possess low prior knowledge, translating to a low ability to engage in analytical processing. This lack of ability might push them towards the peripheral route even if their motivation to find a good product is high. As a result, they might be more likely to rely on peripheral cues as shortcuts. This might explain that unfamiliarity might lead to superficial indicators to manage cognitive load and uncertainty despite the potential for deep engagement with detailed reviews.

The NFC construct was also developed by Cacioppo and Petty in 1982. The concept describes the state of an individual's tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activities (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Individuals high in NFC enjoy abstract thinking even when a topic is irrelevant. In contrast, individuals with low NFC tend to avoid complex thinking and prefer simple tasks (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). As a result, NFC reflects a willingness to engage in deep thinking (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996).

Studies have shown that high NFC individuals are more influenced by argument strength, indicating a preference for the central processing route. In contrast, low-NFC individuals are more sensitive to heuristic cues (Cacioppo et al., 1983). However, it is important to note that low NFC individuals are not incapable of systematic processing. They can think effortfully if highly motivated by situational factors (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982).

Considering the context of this study, NFC acts as a moderator for how unfamiliarity influences the reliance on digital persuasion. Inoculation theory was proposed by McGuire in 1970 to explain how individuals can develop resistance to persuasion by being exposed to weak counterarguments in advance (McGuire, 1970). This theory is not directly about cues. However, it provides a framework for understanding resistance to persuasion. Users naturally have experience buying cosmetics market products or making decisions based on online reviews. For example, facing fake reviews or dropshipping might develop a general skepticism.

The Triune Brain Model offers a biological perspective that aligns with psychological decision-making theories (MacLean, 1990). This model describes the brain as having three evolutionary layers: the reptilian complex, the limbic system, and the neocortex. The reptilian complex is described as the section that controls instincts (MacLean, 1985). Secondly, the limbic system is defined as a section that regulates emotions, motivation, and social bonding (MacLean, 1990). Lastly, the neocortex is the section responsible for reasoning (MacLean, 1985).

This model explains how biological brain structures influence human thought, emotion, and behavior (MacLean, 1990). The application of this theory to the context can be urgency cues from time-limited offers might trigger reptilian as a form of aversion from loss, and before-and-after photos might appeal to the limbic that triggers desire. Therefore, the brain might bypass the more effortful neocortex processing, though prioritizing the primitive brain and leading to quicker, more heuristic-based decisions because they require less cognitive effort and provide immediate emotional gratification.

As contemporary theories regarding persuasion evolved back to their roots, one can state that MacLean's model parallels Aristotle's distinction between logic (neocortex) and emotion (limbic). Similarly, it reflects Freud's structural model of the psyche, with the Id corresponding to the reptilian brain, the Ego to the limbic system, and the Superego to the neocortex.

APPENDIX B. ORGINX INTIMATE FOAM FOR GENITAL ODOR, YEAST, AND DISCHARGE RELIEF WITH WHITENING EFFECT SCREENSHOTS

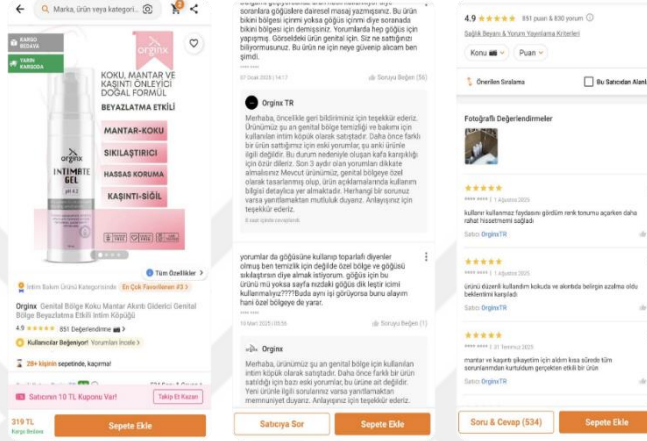


Figure 5: Orginx Intimate Foam for Genital Odor, Yeast, and Discharge Relief with Whitening Effect Trendyol

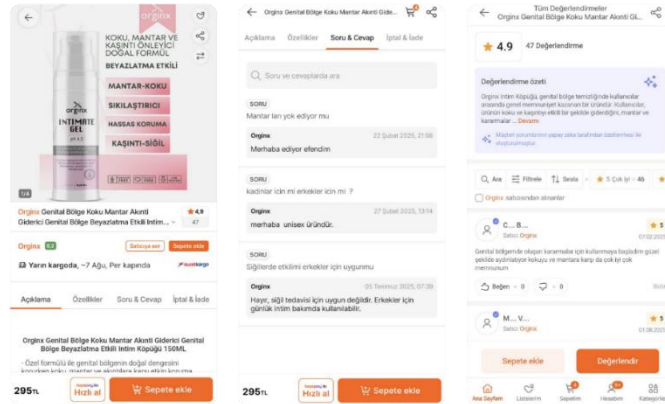


Figure 6: Orginx Intimate Foam for Genital Odor, Yeast, and Discharge Relief with Whitening Effect inx Hepsiburada

APPENDIX C. TOPAXX MEDIUM BROWN HAIR AND BEARD THICKENING & ROOT CONCEALER POWDER SCREENSHOTS

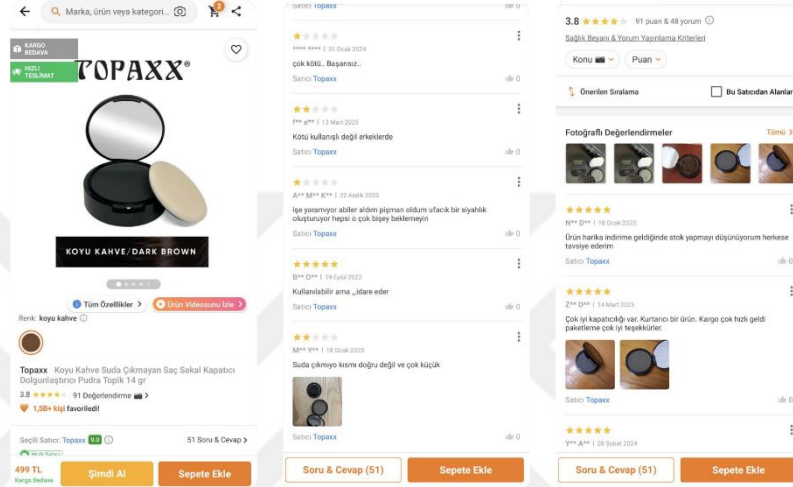


Figure 7: Topaxx Medium Brown Hair and Beard Thickening & Root Concealer Trendyol

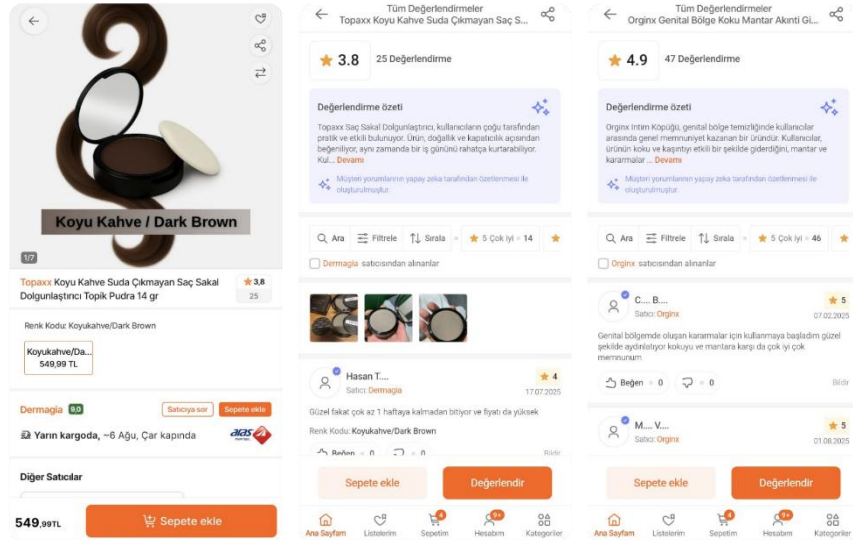


Figure 8: Topaxx Medium Brown Hair and Beard Thickening & Root Concealer Hepsiburada

APPENDIX D. ETHICAL APPROVAL (645)



Bilkent Üniversitesi

Sayı : E-19220902-600.605-62101
Konu : 645 no.lu Etik Onay Başvurusu

27/01/2025

Sayın Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Ayşenur DAL-TOKDEMİR

Danışmanı olduğunuz Ekonomi ve Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Medya ve Görsel Sanatlar Ana Sanat Dalı yüksek lisans programı öğrencisi Ayşegül Karabay'ın 645 no.lu "The Role of Digital Persuasion Cues in Purchase Decisions for Unfamiliar Products on Turkish E-Commerce Platforms." adlı çalışma kapsamında yapmayı önerdiğiniz etkinlik için yaptığınız başvuru Bilkent Üniversitesi, İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu'nun 24/01/2025 tarih ve İAEK_2025_01_24_01 sayılı toplantısında görüşülmüş olup etkinliğin genel bilim etiği açısından uygun olduğuna karar verilmiştir.

Bu karar, yapmayı önerdiğiniz çalışmanın genel bilim etiği açısından bir değerlendirmesi olup, çalışmanızda, kurulumuzun değerlendirmesi dışında kalabilen özel etik ve yasal sınırlamalara uymakla ayrıca yükümlü olduğunuzu bildiririz.

Kurul kararı ekte sunulmaktadır.
Bilgilerinizi rica ederim.

Prof. Dr. Halil Altay GÜVENİR
Bilkent Üniversitesi İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurul Başkanı

Ek: Karar

Bu belge, güvenli elektronik imza ile imzalanmıştır.

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Bilgi için: Birgül BULUT
Yönetici Sekreter
Telefon No: 0 312 29012 14





Bilkent Üniversitesi

AKADEMİK İŞLER REKTÖR YARDIMCILIĞI

İNSAN ARAŞTIRMALARI ETİK KURULU KARARLARI

Toplantı Tarihi : 24/01/2025
Toplantı No : İAEK_2025_01_24_01
Saat : 17:00

Üyeler: Prof. Dr. Halil Altay Güvenir (Başkan), Bilgisayar Mühendisliği
Doç. Dr. Işık Yuluğ, Moleküler Biyoloji ve Genetik
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Burcu Ayşen Ürgen, Psikoloji
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Şemsi Barış Özçelik, Hukuk
Uzman Öğretim Görevlisi Dr. Emine Öncüler Yayalar, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi
Prof. Dr. Özgür Ulusoy (Yedek Üye), Bilgisayar Mühendisliği
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Pınar Altınok Ormancı (Yedek Üye), Hukuk

Gündem: 645 no.lu "The Role of ..." adlı çalışma için etik kurul onay başvurusu.

Karar: Üniversitemiz Güzel Sanatlar, Tasarım ve Mimarlık Fakültesi, İletişim ve Tasarımı Bölümü Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Ayşenur Dal Tokdemir danışmanlığında Ekonomi ve Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Medya ve Görsel Sanatlar Ana Sanat Dalı yüksek lisans programı öğrencisi Ayşegül Karabay'ın 645 no.lu "The Role of Digital Persuasion Cues in Purchase Decisions for Unfamiliar Products on Turkish E-Commerce Platforms." adlı çalışma kapsamında yapmayı önerdikleri etkinliğin genel bilim etiği açısından uygun olduğuna, uygunluk verilen çalışma önerisinin karar ekinde yer alan çalışma önerisi, çalışma yürütücüleri ve bilgilendirme formu için geçerli olduğuna, toplantıya katılan üyelerin oy birliği ile karar verildi.

Prof. Dr. Halil Altay GÜVENİR
Başkan
Katıldı

Doç. Dr. Işık YULUĞ
Üye
Toplantıya Katılmadı

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Burcu Ayşen ÜRGEN
Üye
Toplantıya Katılmadı

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Şemsi Barış ÖZÇELİK
Üye
Katıldı

Dr. Emine ÖNCÜLER YAYALAR
Üye
Katıldı

Prof. Dr. Özgür ULUSOY
Yedek Üye
Katıldı

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Yönetici Sekreter
Telefon No: 0 312 29012 14



(Form Student_EN*)

Ethics form for graduate and undergraduate students - human participants

Note - group projects fill in one copy with all your names on it. Consult your project supervisor for advice before filling in the form.

Your name(s): Ayşegül Karabay

Project Supervisor: Dr. Ayşenur Dal Tokdemir

A. Write your name(s) and that of your supervisor above.

B. Read section 2 that your supervisor will have to sign. Make sure that you cover all these issues in section 1. Discuss what you are going to put on the form with your project supervisor. C. Sign the form and get your project supervisor to complete section 2 and sign the form.

1. Project Outline (to be completed by student(s))

(i) Full Title of Project:

The Role of Digital Persuasion Cues in Purchase Decisions for Unfamiliar Products on Turkish E-Commerce Platforms

(ii) Aims of project:

This thesis aims to explore how digital persuasion cues in online ratings and reviews, such as star ratings and review texts, impact purchase decisions of Bilkent University undergraduate students. The study focuses on unfamiliar cosmetic product presentations on Turkish e-commerce platforms, Trendyol and Hepsiburada, and examines the dual-process theories (ELM and HSM) to understand how these cues influence systematic versus heuristic information processing.

(iii) What will the participants have to do? (brief outline of procedure; please draw attention to any manipulation that could possibly be judged as deception; for survey work, a copy of the survey should be attached to this form):

Participants will engage in focus group discussions where they will analyze and discuss various digital persuasion cues from the selected e-commerce platforms. They will evaluate different types of unfamiliar cosmetic product reviews and ratings, compare product presentations across platforms, and reflect on how these elements influence their purchasing decisions. They will not be subjected to any deception, and their feedback will be collected through semi-structured questions.

(iv) What sort of people will the participants be and how will they be recruited? In the case of children state age range. (Any participant who has not lived through his/her 18th birthday is considered to be a child!)

Participants will consist of undergraduate students from Bilkent University, aged 18-24, whose first language is Turkish. They will be selected based on their recent engagement with online shopping, particularly in the cosmetics category, and their use of platforms like Trendyol and Hepsiburada. Recruitment will be done through university networks, BAIS mailing lists, class announcements, and a friend referral system. Each participant will receive GE251 points for their participation. Additionally, a monetary incentive, provided as a research resource to the supervisor, Dr. Ayşenur Dal Tokdemir, may be distributed to participants.

If you are testing children or other vulnerable individuals, state whether all applicants have CRB² clearance*

(v) What sort stimuli or materials will your participants be exposed to? Tick the appropriate boxes and then explain the form that they take in the space below, please draw attention to any content that could conceivably upset your participants).

Questionnaires[✓]; Pictures[✓]; Sounds []; Words[✓]; Caffeine[]; Alcohol[]; Other[].

Participants will be exposed to various forms of digital content from the e-commerce platforms, including unfamiliar product images, star ratings, and textual reviews. These are not expected to cause any distress.

¹ * Adapted from www.york.ac.uk/depts/psych/www/research/ethics/HumanProjForm.doc

² * Criminal Records Bureau – Please attach relevant clearance documentation.

- (vi) Consent Informed consent must be obtained for all participants before they take part in your project. The form should clearly state what they will be doing, drawing attention to anything they could conceivably object to subsequently. It should be in language that the person signing it will understand. It should also state that they can withdraw from the study at any time and the measures you are taking to ensure the confidentiality of data. If children are recruited from schools you will require the permission of the head teacher, and of parents. Children over 14 years should also sign an individual consent form themselves. When testing children you will also need Criminal Records Bureau clearance. Testing to be carried out in any institution (prison, hospital, etc.) will require permission from the appropriate authority. (Please include documentation for such permission.)

Who will you seek permission from?

Participants will be required to sign an informed consent form before participating in the study. The form will detail the study's purpose, the procedure, their rights, and the confidentiality of their data. Participants will be informed that they can withdraw at any time. Since the study involves adult students, no additional permissions are required.

Please attach the consent form you will use. Write the "brief description of study" in the words that you will use to inform the participants here.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how digital persuasion cues influence consumer choices. Specifically, this study focuses on the unfamiliar cosmetics category in Turkish e-commerce platforms to understand how these digital elements affect decision-making processes.

- (vii) Debriefing - how and when will participants be informed about the experiment, and what information you intend to provide? If there is any chance that a participant will be 'upset' by taking part in the experiment what measures will you take to mitigate this?

Participants will be debriefed immediately before and after the focus group sessions. They will be informed about the study's objectives, the importance of their contributions, and how the data will be used. If any participant feels upset, they will be provided with the option to withdraw their data from the study.

- (viii) What procedures will you follow in order to guarantee the confidentiality of participants' data? Personal data (name, addresses etc.) should only be stored if absolutely necessary and then only in such a way that they cannot be associated with the participant's experimental data.

All personal data will be anonymized and stored securely. Participants will be assigned codes, and their responses will be recorded under these codes. No personal identifiers will be linked to the data. Data will be stored on a password-protected device and only accessible to the researcher.

- (vii) Give brief details of other special issues the ethics committee should be aware of.

There are no additional special issues beyond those already described.

- (viii) Tick any of the following that apply to your project

☒ it uses Bilkent facilities;
☐ it uses stimuli designed to be emotive or aversive;
☐ it requires participants to ingest substances (e.g., alcohol);
☐ it requires participants to give information of a personal nature; ☐ it involves children or other vulnerable individuals; ☐ it could put you or someone else at risk of injury.

Student's signature: *S. Kaya* date: ..03.02.2025.....

(all students must sign if this is a group project, please initial all other pages)

The signatures here signify that researchers will conform to the accepted ethical principles endorsed by relevant professional bodies, in particular to

Declaration of Helsinki (WMA):

<http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/index.html>

Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA):

<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html>

Ethical Standards for Research with Children (SCRD): <http://www.srcc.org/about-us/ethical-standards-research>

2. Supervisor's assessment (supervisor to complete - circle yes or no)

Yes/No - I confirm that I have secured the resources required by this project, including any workshop time, equipment, or space that are additional to those already allocated to me.

Yes/No - The design of this study ensures that the dignity, welfare and safety of the participants will be ensured and that if children or other vulnerable individuals are involved they will be afforded the necessary protection.

Yes/No - All statutory, legislative and other formal requirements of the research have been addressed (e.g., permissions, police checks)

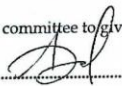
Yes/No - I am confident that the participants will be provided with all necessary information before the study, in the consent form, and after the study in debriefing.

Yes/No - I am confident the participant's confidentiality will be preserved.

Yes/No - I confirm that students involved have sufficient professional competency for this project.

Yes/No - I consider that the risks involved to the student, the participants and any third party are insignificant and carry no special supervisory considerations. If you circle "no" please attach an explanatory note.

No/Yes - I would like the ethics committee to give this proposal particular attention. (Please state why below)

Supervisor's signature:  date: ...03.02.2025.....

Please upload an electronic version of this word processed form (without signatures) along with other application material to the committee to start the evaluation process. Paper copies of all application material, (properly signed where indicated, and initialled on all other pages) should be sent after possible modifications suggested by the committee are finalized.

Bilkent University does not allow the use of students of research investigators as participants. Students who have the potential of being graded by the investigators during or following the semester(s) in which the study is being carried out should not participate in the study. Students may not receive any credit for any university course, with the exception of the GE250/GE251 courses, for their participation. The GE250 and GE251 (Collegiate Activities I and II) courses include an optional activity which encompasses volunteering as a participant in a research project.



APPENDIX E. CONSENT FORM

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Research Project Title: “The Role of Digital Persuasion Cues in Purchase Decisions for Unfamiliar Products on Turkish E-Commerce Platforms”

Researcher: Ayşegül Karabay Phone: (+90) 536 994 82 38
e-mail: aysegul.karabay@bilkent.edu.tr
Supervisor: Dr. Ayşenur Dal Tokdemir Phone: 0312 290 3345
e-mail: aysenur.dal@bilkent.edu.tr

Name _____

(PLEASE PRINT FULL NAME)

You are invited to be a participant in a research study titled “The Role of Digital Persuasion Cues in Purchase Decisions for Unfamiliar Products on Turkish E-Commerce Platforms”. You have been identified as a potential participant as you are an undergraduate student at Bilkent University, aged 18-24, whose first language is Turkish and who has experience with online shopping on platforms such as Trendyol and Hepsiburada. You responded to a call for volunteers for this study, which is being conducted by a master student in the Department of Communication and Design. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in this study. Please note that you cannot participate in this study if you are currently enrolled in a course where the supervisor, Ayşenur Dal Tokdemir, is the instructor.

For the purpose of awarding GE250/251 points, participants will be asked to provide their name, surname, and Bilkent University ID number. This information will be transferred to a Google Forms document and will only be accessible to the researcher and the advisor. Upon completion of the study, this information will be shared with the GE250/251 course management. Each participant who completes the focus group sessions will be awarded **15 points**.

Background Information and Purpose of this Study:

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how digital persuasion cues influence consumer choices and decision-making processes, particularly when evaluating unfamiliar products.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will join a focus group discussion with other Bilkent University undergraduate students. During the session, you will engage in activities such as evaluating different types of product reviews and ratings, comparing product presentations across platforms, and rating your habits of online shopping. You will also discuss how these factors influence your purchasing decisions. The session will be audio-recorded for research purposes and will take about minimum 60 maximum 90 minutes.

Confidentiality:

Your participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. Your personal information will be anonymized, and no identifying details will be linked to the data collected. All

data will be securely stored and only accessible to the researcher. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences, and you may request that your data be removed from the study.

Potential Risks and Benefits:

There are no anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study. The insights gained from this research may contribute to a better understanding of consumer behavior in digital environments, particularly in relation to e-commerce platforms.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether to participate or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Bilkent University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw and request your data be destroyed at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, you may talk to the researcher. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records upon your request.

Consent:

By signing below, you confirm that you have read and understood the information provided, that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, and that you understand you can withdraw at any time.

Participant

Name, last name:

Address:

Phone:

Date:

Signature:

Researcher

Name, last name:

Date:

Signature:

APPENDIX F. PRE-FOCUS GROUP LIKERT-TYPE QUESTIONNAIRE

Likert Ölçeği Uygulaması

Araştırma Projesi Başlığı: “The Role of Digital Persuasion Cues in Purchase Decisions for Unfamiliar Products on Turkish E-Commerce Platforms”

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İfadelerin Derecelendirilmesi

Aşağıda, alışveriş yaparken verdiğiniz kararlarla ilgili çeşitli ifadeler bulacaksınız. Lütfen kendi deneyimlerinizi ve alışkanlıklarınızı göz önünde bulundurarak her ifadeye ne kadar katıldığınızı derecelendiriniz. Aşağıda verilen ölçeği kullanınız. Bu soruların doğru ya da yanlış bir cevabı yoktur. Samimi görüşlerinizi paylaştığınız için teşekkür ederiz.

Likert Ölçeği:

- 1 = Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum
- 2 = Katılmıyorum
- 3 = Kararsızım
- 4 = Katılıyorum
- 5 = Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

1. Çevrimiçi alışveriş yaparken popüler görünen ürünleri keşfetmekten keyif alıyorum.

1	2	3	4	5
Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum	Katılmıyorum	Kararsızım	Katılıyorum	Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

2. Belirli bir süreyle sınırlandırılmış teklifler, ürünün önemli olduğuna dair bir izlenim yaratıyor.

1	2	3	4	5
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Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

3. Bir ürünün yüksek puanlarını görmek, ürün hakkında bir deneyimim olmasa bile kararımı etkiler.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

4. Pek çok kişinin test edip onayladığı yeni bir ürünü denemek konusunda kendimi daha güvende hissedirim.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

5. "Çok Satan" etiketlerini güvenilir ve popüler ürünlerle ilişkilendiririm.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

6. Görsel olarak detaylı puanlar ve incelemeler, metin ağırlıklı olanlara göre daha bilgilendirici geliyor.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

7. Ürün görsellerinde gösterilen 'Vegan', 'Çok Satan' veya 'Uzmanlar Tarafından Onaylı' gibi etiketler, satın alma kararlarımı etkilemez.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

8. Ürün hakkında belirli endişelere değinen yorumları okuduktan sonra karar verme olasılığım daha yüksektir.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

9. Kullanıcıların yüklediği fotoğraflı incelemeler, uzun metin şeklindeki incelemelere kıyasla kararlarımı daha fazla etkiler.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

10. Tanımadığım ürünler için ayrıntılı incelemelerden çok görsel göstergelere ve puanlamalara güvenirim.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

11. Tanımadığım ürünleri değerlendirirken ürün incelemelerinde net kanıtlar (öncesi-sonrası fotoğrafları veya doğrulanmış sonuçlar) ararım.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

12. Tasarım ve duygulara odaklanılarak sunulan ürünler, bana daha cazip geliyor.

1 2 3 4 5

Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum Katılmıyorum Kararsızım Katılıyorum
Kesinlikle Katılıyorum

APPENDIX G FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group

Research Project Title: “The Role of Digital Persuasion Cues in Purchase Decisions for Unfamiliar Products on Turkish E-Commerce Platforms”

Researcher: Ayşegül Karabay

Supervisor: Dr. Ayşenur Dal Tokdemir

Focus Group Questions

The holiday season is approaching, and your class is organizing a "Secret Santa" gift exchange. Your task is to buy a gift for your classmates. However, due to the total number of students in the class, you have been given a special responsibility to choose gifts for two classmates: one female and one male.

You do not know these classmates very well, but through short conversations and observations with other classmates, you have discovered a common trait: both are interested in cosmetic products. Based on this information, and due to limited time, you decided to use online shopping platforms instead of visiting physical stores.

After spending some time researching, you’ve decided on the gifts you want to purchase. However, just before completing the transaction, you hesitated. You found yourself in a dilemma while comparing two shopping apps. You might normally prefer one of these apps, but for this decision, I’d like you to base your choice on the products that will be presented to you. When evaluating which platform offers you a better experience, which platform would you choose?

Broad Questions

When you encounter a product you have never heard of and used before, how do you gather information about it?

Icebreaker Questions

Can you describe a time when you used an online platform to buy a gift?

Introductory Questions

When browsing product pages, what do you focus on the most?

Transition Questions

Did any of the information on the product pages significantly influence your decision-making process?

Key Questions

When comparing the presentation of the same product on different platforms, did you notice any differences?

How did the fact that the products you reviewed were unfamiliar to you affect your evaluation process?

Was there a moment when the information you encountered about a product you hadn't experienced before made your decision easier or harder?

Was there anything unclear and something you wished was explained better about the products?

Closing Question

When evaluating a product during online shopping, do you think you discovered something today that you hadn't noticed or paid attention to before?

APPENDIX H. BAIS E-MAIL

E-ticaret sitelerinde satın alma kararlarımızı hangi faktörler şekillendiriyor? Ürünlere verilen yıldız puanları mı yoksa diğer kullanıcıların yorumları mı?

Bilkent Üniversitesi Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar programı kapsamında yürüttüğümüz araştırmamıza katılarak, Trendyol ve Hepsiburada gibi e-ticaret platformlarında kullanıcı yorumlarının ve değerlendirme sistemlerinin satın alma kararlarınızı nasıl etkilediğini anlamamıza yardımcı olabilirsiniz.

Araştırmamız, kullanıcıların değerlendirme ve yorumlar üzerinden sistematik mi yoksa sezgisel mi karar verdiğini incelemektedir.

Kimler Katılabilir?

✓ Bilkent Üniversitesi lisans öğrencileri ✓ Anadili Türkçe olan katılımcılar

Neler içeriyor?

Anket Detayları

Araştırmacı: Ayşegül Karabay – Bilkent Üniversitesi Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi

Danışman: Dr. Ayşenur Dal Tokdemir

⌚ Süre: Yaklaşık 5-10 dakika

🔗 Anketi doldurmak için tıklayın: <https://forms.gle/gW6eZ96DDxJFYoLm6>

Odak Grup Çalışmaları Hakkında

🗨️ Anketi tamamlayan katılımcılar arasından seçilen kişilerle odak grup çalışmaları yapılacaktır. 📍 Yer: Bilkent Üniversitesi ⌚ Süre: 60-145 dakika

Katılım Teşvikleri:

🎁 15 GE251 puanı 🎁 Starbucuks hediye kartı

Herhangi bir sorunuz veya yorumunuz olursa bana yazabilirsiniz. Katılımınız, araştırmamız için büyük önem taşımaktadır ve desteğiniz için şimdiden teşekkür ederim!

Sevgiler,

Ayşegül Karabay

Bilkent Üniversitesi, Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar Yüksek Lisans Programı

APPENDIX I. FOCUS GROUP INVITATION E-MAIL

Merhaba,

Daha önce sizinle paylaştığımız formu doldurduğunuz için teşekkür ederiz. Çalışmamızın bir sonraki aşamasında odak grup görüşmelerimizi gerçekleştireceğiz ve sizin de bu sürece katkıda bulunmanız bizim için çok değerli.

Görüşmelerin organizasyonunu tamamlamak için katılım durumunuzu netleştirmemiz gerekiyor. Aşağıdaki formu doldurarak uygun olup olmadığınızı belirtmenizi rica ederiz:

<https://forms.gle/BuSgAgxEBHJNZUWd9>

Anketi tamamladıktan sonra odak gruplarına atanacaksınız. Atandığınız odak grup görüşmesi ile ilgili size dijital onam formu, tarih, saat ve yer bilgisi mail üzerinden iletilecektir. Odak gruplarımız sizlere belirtilen tarihlerde İ.D. Bilkent Üniversitesi kampüsünde bulunan Güzel Sanatlar, Tasarım ve Mimarlık Fakültesi binalarında yapılacaktır.

Önemli Not: Katılmak üzere planlanan bir oturuma herhangi bir nedenle katılamayacak olmanız durumunda, programda gerekli düzenlemeleri yapabilmemiz için en az 2 gün önceden haber vermenizi rica ederiz.

Odak grup çalışmalarını tamamlayan her katılımcıya 15 GE250/251 puanı ve Starbucks Hediye Kartı verilecektir.

Herhangi bir sorunuz olursa benimle iletişime geçmekten çekinmeyin. Şimdiden teşekkürler!

Sevgiler,

Ayşegül Karabay

Bilkent Üniversitesi Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi