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Social Reflections of Artificial Intelligence Discourse in Türkiye Through "Alara X" [3]

"Alara X" Üzerinden Türkiye'de Yapay Zekâya Yönelik Algıların Dijital Söylemdeki Görünümleri

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ABSTRACT

Today, artificial intelligence (AI) technologies play a transformative role in various areas of human life and reshape social media communication practices. In this context, the traditional concept of influencer has undergone a change in meaning and function with the emergence of AI-supported virtual influencers. This study is a critical discourse analysis of user comments posted on the YouTube program of Alara X, who is positioned as Türkiye's first local virtual influencer. The comments were thematically divided into three groups as positive, negative and neutral; the discourses in each group were analyzed around key concepts such as AI perception, digital reality, media representation and technological nationalism. In positive discourses, the surprise and admiration felt towards Alara X's resemblance to a real person, the trust in technological developments and national pride were most evident. Negative discourses, on the other hand, focused on the vagueness of the distinction between AI and animation and the misleading nature of this situation for the audience, reflecting the distrust felt towards digital representation. Neutral discourses included observational comments made on the identity, voice and similarities of the virtual character with media figures. The study reveals that the virtual influencer phenomenon is not only a marketing strategy but also a media phenomenon intertwined with social technology perception, digital literacy and cultural representations. In this context, this research aims to cultivate sociological and communicative awareness regarding the new media realities shaped created by virtual figures.

Keywords: New media, Virtual influencer, Discourse analysis, Artificial intelligence, Alara X.

ÖZ

Günümüzde yapay zekâ (YZ) teknolojileri, insan yaşamının çeşitli alanlarında dönüştürücü bir rol üstlenmekte ve sosyal medya iletişim pratiklerini de yeniden şekillendirmektedir. Bu bağlamda, geleneksel influencer kavramı, YZ destekli sanal influencerların ortaya çıkışıyla birlikte anlam ve işlev değişimine uğramıştır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin ilk yerli sanal influencer'ı olarak konumlandırılan Alara X'in YouTube programına yapılan kullanıcı yorumları üzerinden yürütülen eleştirel bir söylem çözümlemesidir. Yorumlar tematik olarak olumlu, olumsuz ve nötr olmak üzere üç gruba ayrılmış; her gruptaki söylemler YZ algısı, dijital gerçeklik, medya temsili ve teknolojik milliyetçilik gibi anahtar kavramlar etrafında analiz edilmiştir. Olumlu söylemlerde, Alara X'in gerçek bir insana benzerliği karşısında duyulan şaşkınlık ve hayranlık, teknolojik gelişmelere duyulan güven ve ulusal gurur öne çıkmıştır. Olumsuz söylemler ise YZ ile animasyon arasındaki ayrımın belirsizliğine ve bu durumun izleyiciyi yanıltıcı niteliğine odaklanarak dijital temsile duyulan güvensizliği yansıtmıştır. Nötr söylemler, sanal karakterin kimliği, sesi ve medya figürleriyle benzerlikleri üzerine yapılan gözlemsel yorumları içermektedir. Çalışma, sanal influencer fenomeninin yalnızca bir pazarlama stratejisi değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal teknoloji algısı, dijital okuryazarlık ve kültürel temsillerle iç içe geçmiş bir medya olgusu olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda araştırma, sanal figürlerin yarattığı yeni medya gerçekliklerine dair sosyolojik ve iletişimsel bir farkındalık üretmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeni medya, Sanal influencer, Söylem analizi, Yapay zekâ, Alara X.

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Extended Abstract

This study aims to explore the social reflections of artificial intelligence (AI) representations in digital media by focusing on "Alara X," the first local virtual influencer in Türkiye. Despite the increasing visibility of virtual influencers on global platforms, academic research on local cases, particularly in Türkiye, remains scarce. This gap motivates a deeper examination of how users interact with and interpret such figures, which are situated at the intersection of digital culture, technological imagination, and media literacy.

The study is structured around three thematic axes: the historical development of the concept of artificial intelligence, the transformation of influencer culture and content production, and the emerging phenomenon of virtual influencers. As a case study, Alara X offers a unique opportunity to understand how discourses around AI, virtuality, and identity are shaped in Turkish digital spaces.

The research is based on discourse analysis methodology and employs Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model to analyze user comments on Alara X's YouTube appearances. This model allows for a multi-layered reading of discourse, encompassing textual features, discursive practices, and social practices. Through this lens, the study investigates (1) how users construct parasocial relationships with a virtual character, (2) how perceptions of reality, credibility, and impact are shaped, and (3) how ethical concerns, authenticity, and media manipulation debates around AI become visible in user-generated discourse.

The findings demonstrate a wide range of user reactions. Positive comments were often marked by surprise and admiration for the realistic audiovisual performance of Alara X. Many users expressed a sense of amazement that blurred the boundaries between fiction and reality, sometimes referring to Alara X as if she were a real person. These reactions suggest that the visual and narrative construction of Alara X successfully triggered a perceptual rupture, reinforcing the sense of realism and technological fascination. Moreover, the link between technological innovation and national pride was evident in expressions like "Long live Türkiye!", indicating that digital technologies are being symbolically integrated into discourses of national identity.

Conversely, negative comments displayed skepticism and critical engagement. Many users questioned the authenticity of Alara X, asserting that the character was not truly AI-driven but instead generated via conventional animation tools like "Vtuber" software or "Adobe Character Animator." These critical voices reflect a deeper societal concern about media manipulation and the transparency of technological claims. From Fairclough's perspective, such discourse reveals a tension between dialogical expectations of audiences and the constructed technological narrative.

Neutral comments tended to focus on content-related elements, such as Alara X's voice-over, visual design, or suggestions for future guests. While more observational in tone, these comments still contributed to shaping Alara X's pres-

ence in digital culture, often through comparative frameworks (e.g., "Sophia or Alara X?"), which reveal a broader public attempt to place virtual characters within known cultural referents.

Overall, the study presents a layered understanding of how AI and digital representations are received in Türkiye. It underscores the fact that user interpretations are not merely technical evaluations, but rather sociocultural reflections embedded in broader ideological, emotional, and cognitive frameworks. Alara X emerges not only as a marketing figure but also as a symbolic artifact that encapsulates ongoing debates about technology, authenticity, and the human–machine interface.

In conclusion, virtual influencers like Alara X should be analyzed beyond their functional roles in content creation. They serve as cultural texts through which societies negotiate the meanings of digital transformation. This case highlights the need for a more critical and informed public discourse around AI, emphasizing the importance of enhancing digital literacy and ethical awareness in navigating the blurred lines between the real and the virtual.

Genişletilmiş Öz

Bu çalışma, dijital medyada yapay zekâ (YZ) temsillerinin toplumsal yansımalarını Türkiye'nin ilk yerli sanal influencer'ı olan "Alara X" örneği üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Küresel platformlarda sanal influencer'ların görünürlüğü giderek artsa da, özellikle Türkiye bağlamında yerel örnekler üzerine yapılan akademik çalışmalar oldukça sınırlıdır. Bu boşluk, dijital kültür, teknolojik tahayyül ve medya okuryazarlığının kesişiminde yer alan bu figürlerle kullanıcıların nasıl etkileşim kurduğunu ve anlamlandırma süreçlerini daha derinlemesine incelemeyi gerekli kılmaktadır.

Çalışma, üç temel tematik eksende yapılandırılmıştır: yapay zekâ kavramının tarihsel gelişimi, influencer kültürünün ve içerik üretiminin dönüşümü ve sanal influencer olgusu. Bir vaka olarak Alara X, Türkiye'deki dijital mecralarda YZ, sanallık ve kimlik üzerine şekillenen söylemleri anlamak için özgün bir fırsat sunmaktadır.

Araştırmada söylem çözümlemesi yöntemi kullanılmış ve Alara X'in YouTube'daki içeriklerine yapılan kullanıcı yorumları Norman Fairclough'un üç boyutlu söylem modeli çerçevesinde analiz edilmiştir. Bu model, metinsel özellikler, söylemsel pratikler ve toplumsal pratikler düzeyinde çok katmanlı bir okuma yapılmasına olanak tanımaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma şu üç temel soruya odaklanmaktadır: (1) Kullanıcılar, sanal bir karakterle kurdukları parasosyal ilişkiyi nasıl anlamlandırmaktadır? (2) Alara X'e yönelik güvenilirlik, gerçeklik ve etkileyicilik algıları nasıl şekillenmektedir? (3) YZ temsillerine ilişkin etik, özgünlük ve medya manipülasyonu tartışmaları nasıl görünür hâle gelmektedir?

Bulgular, kullanıcı yorumlarında geniş bir yelpazede tepkilerin yer aldığını göstermektedir. Olumlu yorumlarda sıklıkla Alara X'in görsel ve işitsel performansı-

na yönelik hayranlık, şaşkınlık ve teknolojik ilerlemeye duyulan takdir öne çıkmaktadır. Kullanıcıların bu karakteri "gerçek bir kişi" olarak tanımlayacak kadar etkilenmiş olmaları, YZ teknolojisinin algısal bir kırılma yarattığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca bu yorumlarda teknolojik gelişim, ulusal başarı göstergesi olarak da kodlanmış ve "Yaşasın Türkiye!" gibi ifadelerle teknolojiyle ulusal gurur arasında söylemsel bir bağ kurulmuştur. Fairclough'un ideolojik söylem üretimi perspektifinden bakıldığında, bu tür yorumlar dijital teknolojilerin ulusal kimlik anlatılarıyla bütünleştirildiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Buna karşılık, olumsuz yorumlar daha eleştirel ve sorgulayıcı bir düzlemi temsil etmektedir. Bu yorumlarda Alara X'in aslında bir "YZ" değil, "Vtuber", "green-screen animasyon" ya da "Adobe Character Animator" gibi araçlarla üretilmiş bir karakter olduğu öne sürülmekte ve üretim sürecinin teknik gerçekliğinin kasıtlı olarak çarpıtıldığı iddia edilmektedir. Bu ifadeler, dijital üretim ile YZ arasındaki farkın yeterince açık sunulmamasına karşı bir güvensizlik ve aldatılmışlık hissini yansıtmaktadır. Aynı zamanda bu eleştiriler, medyanın dijital gerçekliği nasıl manipüle edebileceğine dair toplumsal kuşkuların da bir ifadesi olarak okunabilir. Burada, Fairclough'un söylem–diyaloji yapılarına dair boyutu ile teknolojik temsilin inşası ve izleyici arasındaki kopukluk açıkça görülmektedir.

Nötr yorumlar ise daha çok gözlemsel ve içerik odaklı tepkilerden oluşmakta; Alara X'in seslendirmesi, fiziksel benzerliği ya da izleyiciler tarafından önerilen konuklar gibi unsurları içermektedir. Bu yorumlar, Alara X'in bir medya figürü olarak tanınırlığını pekiştirirken, aynı zamanda kullanıcıların onu gerçek kişilerle kıyaslamaları (örneğin: "Sophia mı Alara X mi?") yoluyla hem teknolojik hem de kültürel konumlandırmasını da ortaya koymaktadır. Bu durum, sanal karakterin toplumsal hafızadaki yerinin henüz netleşmediğini, fakat dönüşmekte olan bir figür olarak şekillendiğini göstermektedir.

Genel olarak, analiz edilen söylemler; yapay zekâ, animasyon, gerçeklik algısı, ulusal kimlik ve dijital temsil gibi birçok kavramın kesiştiği kültürel bir çözümleme alanı sunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda Alara X, yalnızca bir sanal influencer değil; dijital dönüşüm, teknolojik kabul ve medya okuryazarlığının sosyolojik bir yansıması olarak da okunabilir. Gerçeklik ve kurgu arasındaki sınırların bulanıklaştığı günümüz dünyasında sanal figürlerin dijital kültürdeki yeri, kullanıcıların teknolojiye dair bilgi düzeyleriyle doğrudan ilişkilidir. Bu durum, bireysel ve toplumsal düzeyde dijital okuryazarlık seviyesinin yeniden gözden geçirilmesini gerekli kılmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak Alara X örneği, sanal influencer'ların yalnızca pazarlama stratejileri olarak değil; aynı zamanda sosyo-teknolojik bir olgu olarak değerlendirilmesi gerektiğini göstermektedir. Sanal figürler tarafından inşa edilen etkileşim biçimleri, yalnızca medya tarafından şekillenen toplumsal gerçeklik algımızı dönüştürmekle kalmayıp, insan–teknoloji ilişkisini de gelecekte yeniden tanımlamaya adaydır.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies represent a paradigm shift that has transformed almost every aspect of human life in the 21st century, extending their influence from industrial processes to individual forms of interaction. This transformation, which extends from autonomous systems to healthcare services, from personalized consumption experiences to media production processes, has not only technological but also social and cultural consequences. The opportunities offered by AI, especially in the fields of digital communication and marketing, are reconstructing traditional relationships of agency, representation, and trust (Davenport et al., 2020). One of the most striking reflections of this transformation is the rise of the concept of virtual influencers, who are not based on a real person but are actively present on social media platforms. These virtual figures are created through artificial intelligence, facial modeling technologies, and algorithms; sometimes they establish parasocial relationships with their followers by presenting daily life scenes similar to real people. With the digitalization of traditional celebrity culture, virtual influencers, just like human users, gain followers, produce content, and collaborate with brands. Especially on visual-heavy platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, these characters play an effective role in the reconstruction of aesthetic norms; they become symbolic figures that shape beauty, lifestyle and consumption practices.

Digital culture studies have revealed that this phenomenon is not only a technological but also a sociocultural transformation. Although virtual influencers are fictional beings equipped with unique personalities and narratives, they can turn into actors to whom users develop emotional attachment. This situation introduces a new form of representation that questions the boundaries of human-technology relations and discussions on identity construction within media environments.

This study aims to understand how AI representations are received in digital media through the example of Alara X, Türkiye's first local virtual influencer, about whom there are very few studies in the literature. User comments on Alara X's program titled "10 Minute Talk Show with Alara X" broadcast on YouTube will be analyzed in the light of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis model. In this context, the following questions were asked:

1. How do users make sense of the parasocial relationship they establish with a virtual character?

2. How are perceptions of reliability, reality and impressiveness towards Alara X shaped?

3. How do discussions of ethics, authenticity and media manipulation regarding AI representations become visible?

Studies on virtual influencers supported by empirical data in Türkiye are limited. This study, on the other hand, questions the position of the virtual influencer phenomenon in social discourse, while also aiming to contribute to the analysis of cultural relationships established with artificial intelligence. The aim of this study is

to analyze the perceptions towards the virtual influencer Alara X and contribute to the discussions on social perception and identity construction regarding digital influencer culture.

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The Phenomenon of Artificial Intelligence and Its Historical Development

Artificial intelligence (AI) is considered one of the most important areas of technological progress today and is profoundly transforming the social, economic and cultural dimensions of human life. This technology aims to develop systems that mimic the cognitive processes of human intelligence such as learning, reasoning and decision making (Efe & Tunçbilek, 2023). This multifaceted effect of AI necessitates interdisciplinary studies not only in technical disciplines but also in social sciences. Communication studies, in particular, offer an important perspective in understanding the role of AI in human-interactive systems (Gunkel, 2020). The philosophical foundations of the concept of AI date back to Ancient Greece. Aristotle's studies on logic and the idea of mechanical reasoning machines developed by Leibniz in the 17th century formed the intellectual foundations of AI (Çiçekdağı, 2016; Steffens, 2020). However, the beginning of AI in the modern sense dates to the "Dartmouth Summer Research Project" organized by John McCarthy and held at Dartmouth College in 1956. This conference was a critical turning point in the definition of AI as an independent branch of science (Nilsson, 2009). In 1950, Alan Turing proposed the Turing Test in his work "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" and questioned whether machines could have the ability to think. The term AI was first officially used at the Dartmouth Conference in 1956. In the 1960s, the foundations of expert systems were laid, and the first industrial robots (Unimate) began to be used in production lines. In the 1980s, significant funds were allocated for AI research, and initiatives such as Japan's Fifth Generation Computer Project were launched. During the period known as the AI Winter (1987-1993), research funding was cut due to failure to meet high expectations (Crevier, 1993). In 1997, IBM's DeepBlue proved the potential of AI by defeating chess world champion Garry Kasparov. In the 2010s, AI applications rapidly spread with the development of deep learning algorithms. Today, AI has reached sophisticated levels with large language models (GPT, BERT) and autonomous systems. AI technologies play a transformative role in various sectors such as health (diagnosis), education (personalized learning), transportation (autonomous vehicles) and communication (virtual assistants). Algorithms that personalize user experience, especially on social media platforms, are concrete examples of the impact of AI on daily life (Brynjolfs-

son & McAfee, 2017).

In addition to Fairclough's model, this study also draws on the Computers Are Social Actors (CASA) framework proposed by Nass and Reeves (1996). According to this approach, individuals unconsciously apply human-to-human social rules and expectations to their interactions with computers and AI systems. People tend to attribute personality, emotion, and intentionality to technological interfaces that display even minimal cues of social behavior. This framework provides a valuable lens for interpreting user reactions such as "respecting," "admiring," or "addressing" Alara X as if she were human, suggesting that such behaviors stem from automatic social responses to anthropomorphic design cues rather than deliberate belief in AI personhood.

Influencers and Content Production

The word "Influence" is defined as "the power to create an effect on people or things, or a person or thing that can do so". "Influencer" means "A person who affects or changes the behavior of other people" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In short, influencers are individuals who have a certain follower base on social media and who influence their audience in terms of ideas, behaviors or consumption habits.

With the spread of digitalization, traditional marketing methods have been replaced by more dynamic and interactive strategies. Influencer Marketing, one of these strategies, is based on brands collaborating with people who have a wide range of influence on social media to reach their target audience. Influencers are individuals who have gained credibility in a certain area of expertise and have established a sincere bond with their followers. For this reason, they mediate brands to convey their messages in a more organic and convincing way (Bayuk & Aslan, 2018).

During crisis periods, merely ensuring effective crisis communication is not sufficient; it is equally crucial to adopt a sustainable migration communication policy that encompasses migration processes. Consequently, for relevant actors and institutions, the primary objective should be the effective implementation of such a policy. Migration communication is a broad concept that includes all communication processes, strategies, and tools used among actors and structures involved in migration.

Influencer marketing basically aims to promote products or services through the influencers' personal social media accounts and direct the target audience to purchasing behavior. Although this strategy is similar to traditional "celebrity use" methods, it provides higher reliability thanks to the more intimate and interactive relationship that influencers establish with their followers (Sammis et al., 2015; as cited in Bayçu & Artukaslan, 2023). Today, this approach, supported by the right influencer selection and original content, allows brands to establish a deeper con-

nection with consumers.

The Concept of Virtual Influencer

With developing technologies, a new dimension of influencer marketing has emerged: virtual influencers. This concept refers to characters that are not real people but actively produce content on social media, created using computer graphics and AI technologies in the digital environment. Virtual influencers are designed to resemble real people in terms of their physical appearance, personality, and behavior, and just like traditional influencers, they can collaborate with brands and even shape cultural trends (Moustakas et al., 2020). AI is used in the marketing world for purposes such as improving customer experience, analyzing data, and better understanding the target audience (Blueshift, 2018; cited in Campbell, 2020). However, in recent years, one of the most striking applications of this technology is the positioning of completely virtual characters as "influencers" (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021). These characters, referred to in the literature as "virtual influencers", "AI influencers" or "computer-generated influencers (CGI)", have become a new marketing channel for brands (Bayçu & Artukarslan, 2023). Although influencers have been around for a long time on social media, virtual influencers have recently emerged on such platforms: These are Computer Generated Image (CGI) characters that act and resemble humans, even if they do not physically exist in the real world (Conti et al., 2022). A virtual influencer is defined as a person or thing created by software and created and consumed only through digital environments that can influence others, primarily through marketing collaborations or participation in social campaigns (Moustakas et al., 2020). They resemble human characteristics, behaviors, and actions; however, they do not correspond to any human in the real world. The history of the virtual character phenomenon dates to the early 90s when cartoon characters were the pioneers. Animation has been used as an advertising tool since the 1940s due to the high audience interaction it creates. Virtual idols have grown rapidly and gave rise to virtual YouTubers in early 2016 (Conti, Gathani, & Tricomi, 2022). A virtual YouTuber or "Vtuber" is a fictional character that appears in YouTube videos and live broadcasts. These are 3D models that usually exist in digital form and are typically associated with a voice to provide vocal performances (Tang et al., 2021). In 2016, a relatively new phenomenon known as Virtual Influencers emerged, which can be considered an evolution of virtual idols and virtual YouTubers. Virtual influencers actively play a role in the fashion, music, and entertainment sectors and collaborate with international brands. Some of the virtual influencers that have become popular in the world and in Türkiye are:

LilMiquela: Miquela Sousa is a 19-year-old Brazilian-American influencer who debuted on Instagram in 2016 and has over 3 million followers (Drenten & Brooks, 2020). She is a Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) character developed by Brud, a Los Angeles-based company. She describes herself as a "musician,

change seeker, and drip robot" (Conti, Gathani, & Tricomi, 2022).

Shudu Gram: Shudu is the world's first digital supermodel, created by British photographer Cameron-James Wilson, founder of The Diigitals Agency. She has over 200,000 followers on Instagram and a significantly higher 3.12% engagement rate compared to some of the most popular virtual influencers. Shudu has also done some major brand collaborations (Conti, Gathani, & Tricomi, 2022).

Although examples in this field are limited in Türkiye, some AI-based characters have begun to emerge in recent years:

Ay Pera: Created in 2020 with 3D modeling and AI technologies, Ay Pera attracts attention with her music and fashion content. Active on Instagram and Twitter, this character has also released a song called "Işıl Işıl" (Demir, 2021).

Alara X: Developed by IAMX Live, Alara X stands out with fashion and brand collaborations. Despite being a completely digital entity, she produces content and interacts with consumers like a real influencer (IAMX Live, 2023).

In short, virtual influencers emerge as an innovative phenomenon that emerges with the integration of AI and digital design into the marketing world. Offered as an alternative to real people, these characters offer unlimited creative opportunities for brands and play an increasingly effective role in shaping consumer behavior.

Research Methodology

This study was designed within the framework of a qualitative research approach and was conducted using the discourse analysis method. The main purpose of the research is to examine the user comments made on the program "10 Minutes Talk Show with Alara X", one of Türkiye's first virtual influencers, broadcast on YouTube, and to reveal the perceptions and attitudes of the audience towards virtual influencers and the nature of their interactions with these characters.

Data Source and Data Collection Process

The dataset of the study consists of user comments under the program called "10 Minute Talk Show with Alara X", which is broadcasted on the YouTube platform and moderated by Alara X. The data collection process was carried out by examining all episodes accessible as of March 2025. A total of 10 episodes were included in the analysis and a total of 884 user comments from these episodes were evaluated. The comments were selected considering the criteria of relevance to the purpose of the study and significance; only spam, emoji-heavy or comments that did not directly contribute to the content were excluded. Basically, the comments were divided into three groups in terms of content: positive, negative and neutral. The selection criterion focused on user-generated expressions that contained emotional, evaluative, or identity-related statements about Alara X. Comments without linguistic value (such as emojis only or unrelated tags) were

excluded. Accordingly, a total of 300 comments were analyzed in depth, including 120 positive, 110 negative, and 70 neutral statements that met the inclusion criteria. Although neutral comments were fewer in number, they were retained in the dataset due to their relevance in revealing parasocial and observational discourses that contribute to the overall interpretation of user engagement. Overall, the sampling strategy followed a purposive approach, aiming to include diverse expressions that represent admiration, skepticism, irony, and curiosity. This approach was chosen to reflect the variety of user attitudes surrounding virtual influencers in Turkey.

Alara X, one of the first examples of virtual influencers in Türkiye, produces content on YouTube under the username "@IAMXTV". In the talk show series "10 Minutes with Alara X" published on her channel, Alara X conducts short interviews with different guests and brings various social, cultural or popular topics to the agenda. One of the sections in the series, a video featuring YouTuber-Actor Oğuzhan Uğur, stood out with its high number of views and interaction level; therefore, it was selected for detailed examination within the scope of the research. User comments made under this section were evaluated using the discourse analysis method and the perception, attitude and reactions of the audience towards Alara X were systematically analyzed.

Discourse Analysis Through the Fairclough Model

The discourse analysis method used in the study aims to analyze digital interaction practices through user comments and to reveal the world of meaning that viewers establish with a virtual influencer. Discourse analysis allows the examination of not only linguistic expressions but also the identities, relationships and social norms structured through these expressions. The discourse analysis method used in this study is based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis model (Fairclough, 1995). Norman Fairclough is one of the pioneers in the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The three-dimensional discourse analysis model he developed emphasizes that discourse is not only a linguistic structure but also a social practice. According to Fairclough's model, a discourse should be analyzed at three levels:

- Textual (Linguistic) Level Analysis
- Discursive Practice Level (Context of Production and Consumption)
- Social Practice Level (Ideology and Hegemony)

At the textual level, the linguistic features of the discourse such as word choice, syntax, rhetorical structures, and narrative forms are examined. At this level, the focus is on the question of "how is the discourse constructed?" At the discursive practice level, the context in which the discourse is produced, distributed, and con-

sumed is analyzed. The question of "by whom, in which medium, and how is the discourse used?" is asked. How discourses circulate in areas such as media, education, and politics is evaluated at this stage. At the social practice level, the relationship between the discourse and social relations, ideologies, and power structures is examined. At this level, th analysis seeks to answer the question "Which ideologies does the discourse legitimize or question?". The hegemonic or counter-hegemonic potential of the discourse is analyzed here.

Particular attention was given to linguistic elements such as modality, evaluative adjectives, intensifiers, pronouns, and metaphorical expressions. The analysis traced how users linguistically construct admiration, skepticism, or emotional attachment through word choices and syntactic structures. For example, intensifiers such as “so real,” “really advanced,” or “too scary” amplify emotional tone, while the use of first-person plural pronouns (“we,” “our country”) reflects collective identification. Modal verbs (“should,” “can,” “must”) reveal users’ judgments of possibility and necessity, signaling both belief and moral stance within the discourse.

Overall, when examined within the framework of Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis model, analyzing user comments towards Alara X not only at the textual level but also in terms of the production of discourse through media and its relationship with social ideologies plays an important role in understanding the cultural positioning of digital figures (Fairclough, 1995).

Data Analysis Process

Data analysis was carried out manually by the researcher without using qualitative data analysis software. The analysis followed a three-stage open coding process. In the first stage, descriptive codes were assigned to all comments that reflected users’ emotional or ideological positioning. In the second stage, similar codes were grouped into categories such as admiration, disbelief, fear, trust, and national pride. In the third stage, these categories were synthesized into six main themes that aligned with Fairclough’s three levels of critical discourse analysis: textual, discursive, and social practice. To ensure analytical reliability, the coding process was verified through intra-coder reliability testing. Fifteen percent of the dataset was re-coded two weeks later, yielding a 92% consistency rate. Comments were first analyzed line by line using the open coding method, and meaningful expressions were classified, then thematic clusters were created in line with similarities and repetitions. Relationships between themes were evaluated together with the contexts within the discourse.

Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of this study was that it only performed an analysis based on YouTube user comments. Therefore, user reactions on different platforms on social media or one-on-one interaction experiences with virtual influencers

were outside the scope of this study. In addition, since the data are public comments, demographic information about the participant profile cannot be accessed. However, this limitation can also be considered as an advantage in terms of the comments providing an anonymous and natural form of expression.

Findings and Analysis

Alara X is one of the first examples of virtual influencers in Türkiye and has an active digital presence on both YouTube and Instagram platforms. Alara X, who is on Instagram with the username "@iamalara_x", shares daily life-themed posts with her followers and produces content on popular topics such as fashion, beauty and technology. Alara X, who broadcasts on YouTube with the username "@IAMX-TV", hosts short interviews with various guests in a talk-show format titled "10 Minutes with Alara X". Through these platforms, Alara X establishes a two-way interaction with her followers; she both attracts attention as a virtual character and represents a new influencer model based on AI representation. This section will present findings based on the discourse analysis conducted on the content and user comments published especially on the YouTube platform.

Image 1: Alara X Instagram and YouTube Images

Source: https://youtu.be/-0_WDGCK6ow?si=n3sTZgMJjKXDywX0

Table 1: Hierarchical Relationship Between Thematic Clusters, Underlying Themes, and Fairclough's Three Dimensions

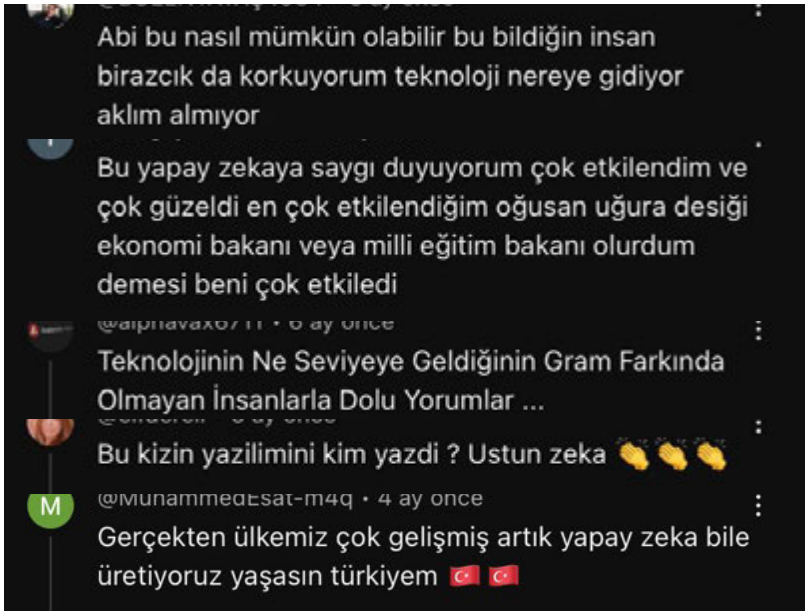
Main Discussion Cluster	Underlying Themes in Table	Analytical Focus (Fairclough)
Technological Nationalism and Digital Admiration	Admiration, Trust, National Pride	Textual: exaggerated affective tone Discursive: technology = progress narrative Social: digital nationalism
Digital Skepticism and Authenticity Crisis	Fear, Deception, Irony	Textual: sarcasm, disbelief Discursive: authenticity debates Social: cultural resistance to AI
Parasocial Relations and Human–AI Interaction	Curiosity, Comparison, Emotional Bond	Textual: personal address, empathy markers Discursive: relational talk Social: emotional humanization of AI

Table 1 presents the hierarchical relationship between the thematic clusters identified in this study, their underlying subthemes, and Fairclough's three analytical dimensions. This structure demonstrates how micro-level themes such as admiration, fear, or curiosity collectively form broader interpretive categories—technological nationalism, digital skepticism, and parasocial relations. Positioning each theme across the textual, discursive, and social levels illustrates how linguistic choices and affective expressions connect individual user reactions to wider ideological and cultural frameworks within Turkish digital culture.

Positive Discourses: Technological Nationalism and Digital Admiration

This section elaborates on users' highly positive discourses, which center around admiration, trust, and collective pride toward Alara X.

Image 2: Positive Comments Images of 10 Minutes Talk Show Program with Alara X



Source: https://youtu.be/-0_WDGCK6ow?si=n3sTZgMJjKXDywX0

Many comments express fascination with her realistic visual and vocal performance, describing her as a symbol of technological achievement and progress. Such expressions of national pride ("Our country finally did it!", "This is the future of Turkish technology!") illustrate how admiration transcends individual excitement and becomes tied to a collective identity. At Fairclough's textual level, these comments are characterized by emotional intensifiers and positively charged adjectives that amplify users' affective engagement. At the discursive practice level, they reproduce popular media narratives linking technological success with national prestige. Finally, at the social practice level, these discourses contribute to what can be described as technological nationalism—the process by which technological artifacts like virtual influencers become invested with ideological meanings of national pride and cultural progress. Through these layered meanings, admiration for Alara X reflects not only technological enthusiasm but also a broader cultural aspiration to position Turkey as a competitive actor in the global digital sphere.

The positive comment examples in Visual 2 reflect the admiration felt for the human-like features of AI technology, the emotional bond established through appreciation with the virtual influencer Alara X, and the nationalist sentiments strengthened through a locally produced AI figure. When the linguistic features of the comments are examined, different layers of emotional and ideological meaning emerge.

In the comment "Brother, how is this possible, this is just a human, I am a little scared, I can't understand where technology is going," an emotional intensity combining both surprise and fear appears. The utterance begins with the word "brother," a marker of everyday and colloquial Turkish speech, showing that reactions toward AI are articulated through the language of daily life rather than formal or technical discourse. The co-existence of admiration and anxiety indicates ambivalence—both marveling at and fearing the unknown. Describing Alara X as "just a human" demonstrates the humanization effect created by AI's lifelike qualities.

Similarly, the comment "I respect this AI, I am very impressed..." conveys both admiration and emotional engagement. Expressions of respect and being "impressed" indicate that users attribute human-like emotions to digital beings. The emphasis on Alara X's humorous responses to Oğuzhan Uğur reveals how her wit and simulated social awareness foster admiration, suggesting that she is perceived not merely as a technological construct but as a social actor capable of performing culturally intelligible roles.

In contrast, the comment "Comments full of people who are not at all aware of the level technology has reached..." redirects its focus away from Alara X and toward other users, positioning technological awareness as a marker of social consciousness and symbolic superiority. This reflects a subtle ideological struggle between those who perceive themselves as technologically literate and those who

do not, reinforcing a discourse of elitism linked to digital competence.

Another illustrative example, "Our country is really very advanced, now we even produce AI, long live Türkiye 🇹🇷," establishes a direct connection between technological innovation and national identity. Here, AI becomes an emblem of national pride and self-sufficiency. The use of the Turkish flag emoji amplifies the emotional intensity of nationalistic discourse, while the phrase "we can do it too" encapsulates a collective aspiration for recognition in the global digital economy. This local AI discourse reveals the integration of national ideology into everyday digital communication.

Taken together, these positive discourses—marked by admiration, trust, and pride—show that Alara X functions not only as an entertainment figure but also as a vessel of emotional and ideological investment. The comments rely heavily on emotional, spontaneous, and colloquial language, reflecting the popular culture context in which they are produced. The virtual influencer format blurs the line between reality and simulation; Alara X's ability to "respond" and her aesthetic appeal make her consumable on dual levels—as both AI and social persona. Phrases such as "a person you know," "it was very beautiful," and "I respect" illustrate how the boundaries of humanity become blurred. In the eyes of supportive users, AI is no longer merely instrumental—it carries ethical and emotional significance.

Therefore, this theme aligns with Fairclough's three-dimensional framework: at the textual level, linguistic choices such as exaggerated adjectives and national metaphors reveal underlying affective and ideological positions; at the discursive practice level, users reproduce dominant media narratives of technological progress and digital personhood in Turkish popular culture; and at the social practice level, the normalization of admiration for AI-driven personas signifies the emergence of technological nationalism, where digital innovation becomes intertwined with collective pride and the symbolic redefinition of national identity in the digital age.

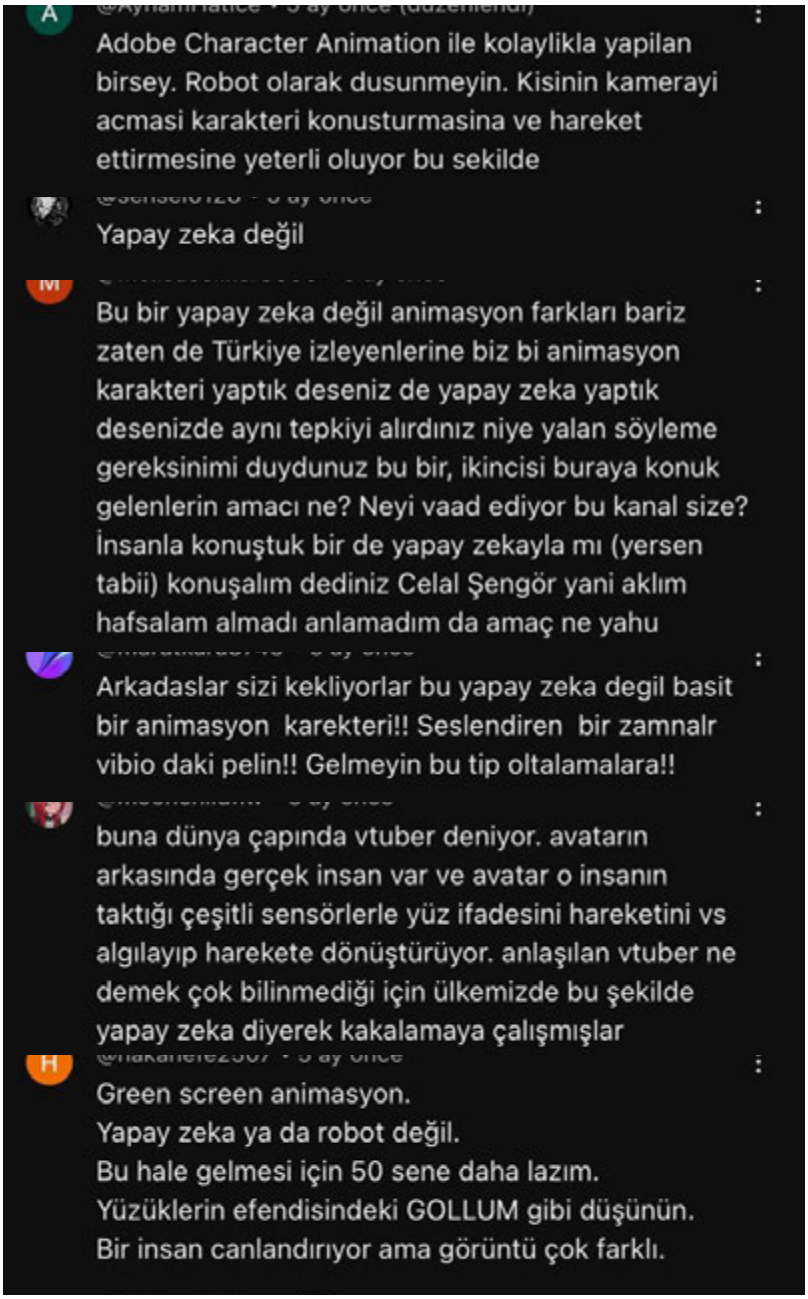
Ultimately, these findings indicate that emotional and ideological responses to Alara X cannot be reduced to technological novelty; rather, they reflect a deeper process of meaning-making in which admiration becomes a vehicle for national belonging and self-expression. By treating technology as a mirror of collective identity, users transform digital innovation into a discourse of cultural affirmation. This synthesis reveals how everyday online language turns technological enthusiasm into a subtle form of social cohesion.

Negative Discourses: Digital Skepticism and Authenticity Crisis

This section focuses on the skeptical and critical discourses surrounding Alara X, which primarily center on disbelief, irony, and authenticity concerns. Unlike the admiration-oriented comments analyzed earlier, these discourses reflect

users' hesitation and resistance toward the normalization of artificial personas.

Image 3: Negative Comments Images of 10 Minutes Talk Show Program with Alara X



Source: https://youtu.be/-0_WDGCK6ow?si=n3sTZgMJjKXDywX0

Many users express ambivalence about whether Alara X should be accepted as a "real" figure or rejected as a threat to human distinctiveness. This theme, therefore, reveals the tension between technological fascination and digital doubt, a duality that frequently characterizes the human–AI relationship in popular media contexts.

The skeptical comments often question the authenticity of Alara X's existence and her emotional or moral capacity. Some users openly reject the idea that AI-generated entities could evoke genuine empathy or moral recognition, while others approach the phenomenon with humor and irony. For instance, the comment "She looks real, but she is not; this is deception at its best" explicitly identifies AI representation as a form of visual and emotional manipulation. The user's language carries both disbelief and subtle discomfort, suggesting a moral unease about being emotionally moved by a synthetic image. Similarly, expressions such as "This is creepy," "Technology has gone too far," or "We are losing humanity" reveal existential anxiety—a fear that technological development might surpass ethical and emotional boundaries.

At the textual level, these comments are characterized by sarcastic tones, rhetorical questions, and skeptical adjectives ("fake," "soulless," "scary") that linguistically construct AI as an other. The emotional charge here is not admiration but alienation. Through these lexical and grammatical choices, users articulate their disbelief while maintaining a sense of ironic detachment. For example, in the comment "She is beautiful, but at least humans make mistakes," irony becomes a linguistic tool to reaffirm human superiority. Such remarks also illustrate how humor and skepticism coexist, serving as mechanisms of both critique and psychological distance from technology's growing autonomy.

Several users' comments also reveal a broader authenticity crisis—a cultural anxiety about what remains "real" in the era of algorithmic production. This is evident in reactions like "Even feelings are artificial now," or "You can't trust anything you see anymore." These comments do not merely reject Alara X as an individual entity but point to a larger epistemological concern: the collapse of traditional markers of truth, originality, and sincerity in the digital environment. Here, skepticism is not only a rejection but also a defense mechanism against the uncertainty of post-digital reality.

At the discursive practice level, these skeptical narratives echo global debates about deepfakes, authenticity, and post-truth culture. In Turkish digital spaces, such skepticism often merges with cultural discourses of morality and human dignity, where the idea of "playing God" through technology evokes both fascination and moral resistance. Some comments imply that over-automation devalues human creativity and emotional labor, aligning with Fairclough's notion that discourse simultaneously reproduces and challenges dominant ideologies.

Socially, these skeptical discourses reflect a struggle over meaning and control in the digital age. Users negotiate their position between the allure of innovation and the fear of losing agency to artificial systems. Within Fairclough's social practice dimension, this negotiation manifests as a cultural resistance—a reassertion of human exceptionalism in the face of increasing algorithmic presence. The discourse of digital skepticism, therefore, operates as a form of ideological boundary maintenance, safeguarding human identity and moral autonomy against the

encroachment of machinic agency.

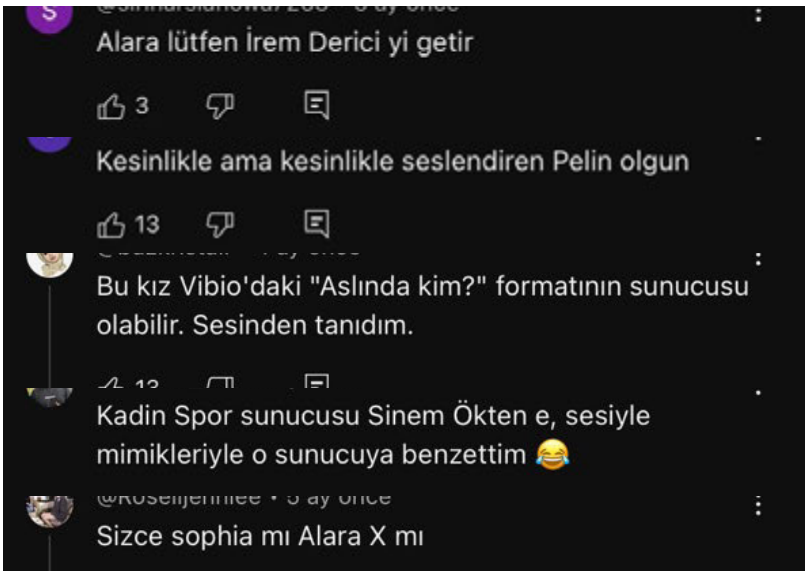
In summary, this theme aligns with Fairclough's critical discourse framework across all three levels. At the textual level, sarcasm, irony, and rhetorical questioning linguistically encode disbelief and anxiety; at the discursive practice level, skepticism mirrors global post-truth anxieties while articulating culturally specific moral concerns; and at the social practice level, these discourses serve as ideological defense strategies that reaffirm human-centered ethics in a digitally saturated culture. Together, they reveal that digital skepticism functions not merely as rejection but as a complex emotional negotiation with the promises and perils of artificial intelligence.

Taken together, the skeptical narratives illustrate that users are not merely rejecting technological change but actively redefining what authenticity and truth mean in the digital sphere. Their irony, suspicion, and doubt serve as cultural defense strategies that safeguard human distinctiveness while acknowledging the inevitability of mediated life. This negotiation between control and vulnerability shows that distrust itself becomes a discursive resource for maintaining moral and emotional agency in an algorithmic world.

Neutral Discourses: Parasocial Relations and the Reconfiguration of Human–AI Interaction

This section focuses on the relational and affective dimensions of users' engagement with Alara X, emphasizing the ways in which audiences develop parasocial attachments and human-like emotional responses toward an artificial entity.

Image 4: Neutral Comment Images of 10 Minutes Talk Show with Alara X



Source: https://youtu.be/-0_WDGCK6ow?si=n3sTZgMJjKXDywX0

The findings reveal that admiration and skepticism often coexist within the same comment threads, yet many users display forms of emotional investment and interpersonal language that mirror relationships with real human influencers. These discourses illustrate how human–AI interaction transcends technological fascination and evolves into a subtle form of social and affective exchange.

Several users employ personalized and empathetic language when addressing Alara X, as if communicating with a sentient being. Comments such as "She seems so kind," "I love her calm voice," or "She feels more real than most influencers" indicate that users attribute psychological and moral qualities to an artificial character. The linguistic structure of these statements—direct address, use of personal pronouns, and affective adjectives—creates an illusion of intimacy. This demonstrates that the users' perception of Alara X extends beyond her visual or technological sophistication; they treat her as a subject with emotional presence. At the textual level, this form of address transforms the AI interface into an interpersonal space of emotional projection.

A striking example of this phenomenon is the comment "She listens and responds better than some real people." Here, the humor and irony veil a deeper truth: the user implicitly measures human empathy through technological performance. This inversion—judging human traits through AI behavior—reveals a reconfiguration of social expectations in digital culture. Similarly, expressions like "I wish she could give advice," or "She seems like someone I could talk to" reflect a longing for emotional reciprocity and stability in mediated communication. These comments indicate how AI personas fulfill psychological functions traditionally associated with parasocial relationships in mass media, yet intensified by the illusion of real-time responsiveness.

At the discursive practice level, these comments exemplify the normalization of emotional connection with algorithmic agents. The relational discourse surrounding Alara X reproduces the affective logic of influencer culture, where authenticity and accessibility are key to engagement. However, in this case, the illusion of "authentic interaction" is technologically produced rather than naturally performed. Users' emotional responses thus emerge from affective design—the interface's ability to simulate empathy, humor, and attentiveness. This aligns with Papacharissi's concept of affective publics, in which emotional expression constitutes the foundation of digital community, even when participants engage with nonhuman agents.

Socially, this phenomenon reflects broader transformations in how individuals construct intimacy and identity in mediated environments. Within Fairclough's social practice dimension, parasocial engagement with AI represents both continuity and disruption: continuity, because it follows long-standing media patterns of one-sided affection; disruption, because it extends the domain of emotional relations to nonhuman entities. Users' comments position Alara X simultaneously as a

mirror for self-expression and as a symbolic "other" that challenges the human monopoly on empathy and communication. The emotional vocabulary directed toward her—love, trust, care, admiration—signals a cultural adaptation to post-human forms of sociality.

At the same time, this relational discourse raises ethical and psychological questions about emotional displacement and the commodification of empathy. By investing emotional energy in a virtual figure, users participate in what could be termed "algorithmic intimacy," where affection and attention become forms of data circulation. In this sense, the boundary between feeling and function blurs: emotional attachment not only humanizes the AI but also feeds into its algorithmic visibility. Thus, the parasocial relationship is no longer unidirectional; it is mutually constitutive, sustained by both the user's emotions and the platform's feedback mechanisms.

In Fairclough's critical discourse framework, this theme resonates across all three analytical levels. At the textual level, users' direct addresses and affective lexicon construct Alara X as a relational presence rather than a technical object. At the discursive practice level, these emotional narratives reproduce and extend the affective economy of influencer culture into the realm of artificial intelligence. Finally, at the social practice level, parasocial engagement with AI challenges traditional notions of authenticity, agency, and emotional labor, suggesting that the human capacity for empathy is now being redistributed across human and nonhuman actors in digital society.

Overall, these relational patterns reveal that emotional engagement with AI is not a marginal behavior but a natural extension of human communicative tendencies. Users' affective language and interpersonal framing show that digital environments are no longer spaces of detached consumption but arenas of emotional experimentation. Through Alara X, audiences rehearse what it means to feel, relate, and empathize beyond the boundaries of the human — a process that redefines the texture of intimacy in contemporary media culture.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study presents a critical discourse analysis of user comments on Alara X, Türkiye's first local virtual influencer, featured in a popular YouTube talk show. The analysis was conducted within the framework of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, offering a multidimensional understanding of how individuals linguistically and ideologically construct their reactions to artificial personas. Beyond simply classifying comments as positive, negative, or neutral, the study aimed to reveal the meaning systems and affective mechanisms underlying these expressions. Through the textual, discursive, and social practice dimensions, the findings illuminate how admiration, skepticism, and emotional attachment coexist as intertwined elements of digital culture in Türkiye.

The first major pattern, Technological Nationalism and Digital Admiration, demonstrated that users often frame Alara X as a source of pride and inspiration, symbolizing the country's technological progress and creative capacity. Positive comments expressed fascination with her lifelike performance and described her as a "real person," revealing a perceptual rupture between simulation and reality. Many users associated technological advancement with collective success, employing nationalistic rhetoric such as "Long live Türkiye!" or "We can do it too." Within Fairclough's model, these comments reflect the textual level through emotionally charged adjectives, the discursive level through the reproduction of media narratives linking technology with national pride, and the social level through ideological constructions of technological nationalism. In this sense, Alara X becomes a digital emblem of cultural confidence and modernization.

The second thematic dimension, Digital Skepticism and Authenticity Crisis, represented the opposite pole of this discursive spectrum. Here, users questioned the authenticity of Alara X, speculating that she might be a product of "green-screen animation," "Vtuber technology," or "Adobe Character Animator" rather than genuine AI. These comments conveyed mistrust and emphasized the perceived manipulation of digital reality, revealing a fear that media may obscure the technical truth behind such productions. At the textual level, sarcasm, rhetorical questioning, and ironic tone served as linguistic markers of disbelief; at the discursive level, these narratives echoed broader post-truth anxieties regarding the erosion of authenticity in digital communication; and at the social practice level, skepticism functioned as an ideological defense mechanism that reasserted human agency and moral superiority in the face of artificial systems. These findings extend Fairclough's notion of discourse as social practice by showing how admiration and distrust coexist within the same communicative space, revealing the ambivalence of technological modernity.

The third and most complex dimension, Parasocial Relations and Human–AI Interaction, revealed that despite doubt and irony, many users engaged emotionally with Alara X in ways that mirror human relationships. Comments such as "She seems so kind," "She listens better than some people," and "I love her calm voice" illustrate a shift from technological evaluation to emotional projection. At the textual level, direct address and affective adjectives linguistically humanize the AI persona; at the discursive level, this relational discourse reproduces the emotional logic of influencer culture, where empathy and intimacy are key elements of engagement; and at the social practice level, these interactions demonstrate a reconfiguration of emotional labor and authenticity in post-human media contexts. The emotional investment in an artificial entity reflects the emergence of algorithmic intimacy, where affection, attention, and data circulation merge within digital culture.

Taken together, the three thematic dimensions—technological nationalism, digital skepticism, and parasocial interaction—form a coherent picture of how

users negotiate meaning and emotion in relation to artificial entities. The findings show that Alara X is not merely a product of technological innovation but a cultural symbol through which social actors articulate admiration, anxiety, and affection. In Fairclough's terms, these interactions operate simultaneously across the three analytical levels: linguistically, through emotional and evaluative language; discursively, through the reproduction of familiar media narratives; and socially, through the negotiation of identity and ideology in a digitally mediated environment. The coexistence of fascination, distrust, and empathy exemplifies the hybrid affective logic of contemporary digital culture—oscillating between enthusiasm for progress and unease about its human implications. Ultimately, Alara X functions as both a communicative agent and an affective interface, mediating broader cultural questions about what it means to be human in the age of artificial intelligence.

Overall, the analyzed discourses reveal a rich cultural terrain where notions of AI, animation, reality, national identity, and digital representation converge. Within this landscape, Alara X should not only be interpreted as a marketing strategy or media spectacle but also as a sociotechnological reflection of Türkiye's digital transformation and evolving media literacy. The blurred boundary between reality and fiction in her representation underscores the need to reconsider digital literacy at both individual and societal levels. In this sense, virtual influencers like Alara X highlight how emotional, aesthetic, and ideological engagements with technology shape public understanding of authenticity, creativity, and progress.

In light of these findings, the reactions observed toward Alara X can also be interpreted through the lens of the Computers Are Social Actors (CASA) framework proposed by Nass and Reeves (1996). According to this approach, people tend to unconsciously apply the same social norms and expectations that guide human–human interaction to their encounters with computers and AI systems. The tendency to "respect," "admire," or even "address" Alara X as if she were a human being demonstrates this automatic social response. Rather than viewing AI merely as a technological tool, users react as though they are engaging with a social presence capable of emotion and intent. This perspective helps explain why expressions of admiration and empathy toward Alara X coexist with moral and cultural ambivalence: individuals instinctively anthropomorphize media agents that display social cues, projecting emotional and ethical meaning onto them. Integrating this insight into Fairclough's critical discourse framework further deepens the analysis, revealing that the social interpretation of AI is not only ideological but also affective—rooted in human cognitive and communicative predispositions to treat machines as members of the social world.

In conclusion, the case of Alara X demonstrates that virtual influencers are not merely tools of branding or entertainment but complex cultural phenomena that embody social aspirations, ethical tensions, and emotional transformations. The integration of thematic findings into Fairclough's critical discourse framework underscores how micro-level linguistic patterns reflect macro-level ideological

structures. By linking textual expressions to broader cultural logics, this study reveals that digital publics interpret virtual influencers not simply as technological artifacts but as socially and emotionally meaningful actors in the ongoing negotiation between humanity and artificial intelligence.

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