

## **The Challenge of Constructing a Unique Online Identity Through an Isomorphic Social Media Presence**

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Grounded in institutional theory for analyzing and differentiating isomorphic identity features, this study aims to analyze how foundation universities in the higher education field of Turkey use social media to construct their online identities. To determine the themes used by these universities for their online identity construction, secondary data were collected from the universities' social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter). Content analysis was conducted to identify the major themes and theme categories used by the foundation universities. Study results revealed that to construct a unique identity while embracing widely accepted industry practices, foundation universities concentrate their communication efforts mainly on public relations. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing insights from the higher education field into the challenge of constructing a unique identity while communicating similar identity elements so as to establish legitimacy through isomorphism. This study proposes that foundation universities communicate both distinctive identity elements through persuasion to be able to stay in competition and identity elements consistent with industry norms through mimetic and normative isomorphism to gain legitimacy.

*Keywords: online identity, institutional theory, organizational communication, content analysis, social media platforms, foundation universities*

In their seminal article, "Organizational Identity," Albert and Whetten (1985) provide a conceptual basis for defining organizational identity as the "central, distinctive and enduring characteristics of an organization" (p. 265). They and their followers approach identity as a subjective

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phenomenon and thus posit that these qualities are lent to an organization by its constituent members; hence, organizational identity essentially means members' subjective evaluations of their respective organizations (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991, p. 520). As seen from these organizational identity definitions, most researchers in the field conceptualize organizational identity by concentrating on distinctive organizational characteristics.

At the same time, through its identity claims, an organization announces its belongingness to a certain field and thus defines and legitimizes itself through this belongingness. In this way, organizational identity simultaneously gestures to its resemblance to other organizations in its particular field as well as to its difference, as demonstrated by its own individual characteristics. This signifies the paradoxical nature of organizational identity (Brewer, 1991; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001).

Gioia and Thomas (1996) further elaborate on the process of conceptualizing organizational identity using a rationalist and functionalist approach, which asserts that once organizational identity is institutionalized, it works as a cognitive schema directing organizational members (Brunninge, 2005, p. 18). For them, at the same time as recognizing its belonging to a special organizational category, the organization also takes on the challenge of revealing the differentiating features that help to distinguish it from others. Brunninge describes this as "the inherent tensions in the interplay of self-understanding (on the organizational level) and forces pushing toward isomorphism (field level)" (p. 70). Guided by the previous work in institutional theory and organizational identity and considering the challenging nature of organizational identity construction dynamics, this study aims to understand how organizations operating within the same organizational field, which itself imposes institutional pressures directing those organizations to resemble one another—referred to as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)—manage to construct a unique identity.

This article begins with a discussion of both organizational identity literature and its intersections with online identity conceptions from an institutional theory perspective. Next, the higher education context in Turkey and the introduction of the Foundation University (FU) as a new organizational form is presented. The methodology section outlines the research design, the methods used for data collection, the coding process, and the analysis. In the results and discussion section, the findings are elaborated in light of the theoretical background, patterns are identified in FUs' online presence, and theoretical contributions are discussed. Finally, the article concludes by discussing the limitations of the study and its implications for future work.

## **Theoretical Background**

### ***Reflections of Organizational Identity From an Institutional Theory Perspective***

Identity is considered the foundation and essence of organizations (Bick, Jacobson, & Abratt, 2003). Work in this field has highlighted how organizational identity can be approached from different theoretical perspectives and as such is inherently paradoxical (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Glynn & Abzug, 2002). Many focus on the distinct characteristics of organizations (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Hatch & Schultz, 1997); others emphasize how similarities among organizational identities result from being

part of an organizational field (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Glynn & Abzug, 2002). This variance of views points to the multidimensional and paradoxical nature of the construct. For the purposes of this study, both perspectives are to be held in view and are critically important in our understanding of organizational identity.

When organizational identity is considered from the field level, similarities among organizations become evident; however, when individual organizations within the field are considered discretely, differences among organizations become more visible (Glynn & Abzug, 2002). For instance, Stinchcombe (1965) argues that in the initial stages of their establishment, organizations operating in a specific organizational field resemble one another because they have the same environmental conditions and surrounding resources. Through the "imprinting" concept, as circumstances during the organization's establishment are being determined throughout the life stages of the organization, Stinchcombe (1957) explains that organizations' similarity would remain in spite of the significant changes in structures and processes during the development of the organizational form in time. Thus, organizational identity manifests both characteristics of the organization that are distinctive from other relevant peer organizations within the field and organizational similarities as a representation of the characteristics of the organizational field.

Researchers within institutional theory understand the development of an organizational identity as an organizational response to the varying demands of the institutional environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1991) for ensuring survival (Palmer & Biggart, 2002). Over time, these responses work to produce institutional isomorphism (Palmer & Biggart, 2002). George, Castro, and Rincon (2018) define institutional isomorphism as "the process by which organizations, such as universities, become increasingly homogenous through their interactions with one another and with third parties" (p. 3). Therefore, institutional isomorphism can be described as the interaction of organizations with their environments "in ways that result in homogenous responses" (Lamb & Weiner, 2018, p. 140).

Institutional isomorphism is determined by the interplay between three discrete modes of isomorphism: normative, coercive, and mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive isomorphism operates under regulations and rules imposed by powerful actors, such as states, and relies on avoiding punishment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It is the organization's response to external pressures imposed by other entities or societal norms (George et al., 2018), expressed through laws and regulations (Biesenthal, Clegg, Mahalingam, & Sankaran, 2018). In compliance with these rules and regulations generated by the powerful actors and societal norms, organizations form isomorphic behaviors and structures.

Mimetic isomorphism is operative under institutional uncertainty and relies on mimicking prevailing structures and applications (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lamb & Weiner, 2018). George et al. (2018) put forward that mimetic isomorphism is "the intentional or unintentional replication of what is perceived to be working successful [*sic*] in other organizations" (p. 3) or the adoption of structures and the process of organizations perceived as superior or to have better adapted to their institutional environments (Hüther & Krücken, 2016). Normative isomorphism, on the other hand, relies on gaining the approval of actors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Most commonly, normative isomorphism stems from

professionalization (Lamb & Weiner, 2018). Through the involvement of the members of a certain profession to an organization, the norms and expectations of that profession are acquired by organizations, which yield to organizational homogenization in terms of their procedures, processes, and structures (George et al., 2018; Hüther & Krücken, 2016).

Neo-institutional theory, which focuses particularly on the field level (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott & Meyer, 1983), proposes that through isomorphism mechanisms, organizations strive to belong to a special organizational field, which in turn encourages the development of substantial similarities among organizations performing comparable functions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Ultimately, institutional theorists posit that the main consequence of this isomorphism is the consolidation of organizational legitimacy (Deephouse, 1996). Here legitimacy is a socially constructed assumption that certain "organizational activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 577).

Although organizations operating within the same organizational field demonstrate similarities due to the isomorphism mechanisms, organizations also create their own characters through a "self-internal," or reflexive, "view" that differentiates them from similar organizations within their institutional environment (Steele & King, 2011). Thus, Selznick (1957) emphasizes that an organization creates its own value system and character as a response to the pressures from other actors within the institutional field. For Selznick, an organization's actions gain legitimacy and meaning only if they are coherent with and placed within the framework of the organizational character. In other words, forming an organizational identity or acquiring a "self-understanding is one of the outcomes of the institutionalization process" (Brunninge, 2005, p. 69; Selznick, 1957). Characterizing these tensions between striving for similarity while establishing particularity and difference, neo-institutionalism sees individual organizational identity as a crucial authentication factor in distinguishing one organization from others within a specific organizational field (Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 1996; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Oliver, 1991).

Similarly, Suddaby, Ganzin, and Minkus (2017, p. 292) indicate that unlike legitimacy construct discourse, which stresses similarities, authenticity discourse involves notions of uniqueness and a logic of identity. Likewise, these same critics draw attention to how the legitimacy process is initiated by language and discourse (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) and point out the fundamental role of discourse and communication in legitimation, an area that is yet to be adequately studied (Suddaby et al., 2017). In an attempt to shed light on this area, therefore, the following section elaborates on the role of organizational identity communication from an institutional theory perspective.

### ***Organizational Identity Communication From an Institutional Theory Perspective***

Based on the main argument that "identities are socially constructed through language" (Fiol, 2002, p. 653; see also Cheney & Thompkins, 1987; Swann, 1987), language and discourse have been a fundamental focus of organizational identity studies, and various studies have pointed to the crucial role communication plays in constructing organizational identity (Olins, 1989). Moreover, because communication is the foundation of social interaction, many critics have elucidated its determining effect

on identity construction (Postmes, 2003). Accordingly, organizations have been understood to manifest their identity declarations by using various means of communication in pursuit of manipulating stakeholder perceptions (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Thus, while organizational identity refers to organizations' self-presentation, undertaken to help shape stakeholder perceptions, organizational communication is a priori and plays an instrumental role in identity construction.

As Huang-Horowitz and Freberg (2016) explain, organizations manifest their identity themes in several contexts and via multiple forms of published documents, including social media posts and official website information. Considering that organizations use language as a means of identity construction and communicate their identity themes through varied communication platforms, the present study aims to provide an answer to the following research question: What themes, both similar and unique, and what theme categories are used as units of communicated language that manifest the online identities of Turkish FUs, and in what ways do they lead to an isomorphic and/or differentiated online presence to ensure legitimacy and/or authenticity?

Studies focusing on the organizational identity of higher education are relatively sparse (Atakan & Eker, 2007). However, some outstanding studies provide valuable insights for our purposes (Garcia & Hardy, 2007; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Labianca, Fairbank, Thomas, Gioia, & Umphress, 2001; Melewar & Akel, 2005). In their study on the University of Warwick, Melewar and Akel investigate the motives behind corporate identity change and show how the university's corporate identity program evolved. Similarly, the study by Humphreys and Brown on the Westville Institute and identification reveals how organizational narratives can evolve over time and highlights the individual and collective processes in organizational identity construction. Based on the narratives of organizational members, the study undertaken by Garcia and Hardy elaborates on the process by which organizational members help to construct organizational identity by using varying patterns.

In their study, Gioia and Thomas (1996) show that mimetic isomorphism is crucial to specific organizational change as university administrators try to create a new image by emulating the top 10 universities. They also found that through this emulation process, the identity feature of being distinctive is undermined and loses its criticality to the institution in question. Labianca et al. (2001) also focus on the choice of emulation among American higher education institutions, finding that rather than structural similarities, organizational identity comes to the forefront as the determining factor in the emulation process.

The diverse focus of these studies limits our ability to extrapolate general rules or inferences, which can directly translate across institutional and geographical specificities. This study therefore seeks to address this research gap by attempting to understand the complex nature of organizational identity construction in Turkey's higher education sector. To provide historical background, the following section elaborates on the higher education field in Turkey in general and the emergence of FUs as an organizational form in particular.

### ***Higher Education in Turkey and FUs***

Starting in the eighties, the Turkish government made a series of legislative regulations to establish at least one state university in every city to meet the increasing demands of access to higher education and to minimize regional disparities in education quality. However, it swiftly became clear that, with a rising young population, public universities alone would be unable to meet the demands of higher education access within Turkish society. Therefore, in 1983, the establishment of FUs was officially announced. Since then, consecutive Turkish administrations have promoted the establishment of such institutions (Hopoğlu, 2012).

Previous to this juncture and the establishment of the first FUs in the late eighties, higher education was treated, regulated, and promoted as a public service in Turkey; thus, the only organizational form, which existed in the field, was the state university. Yet, after this point, the new organizational form of the FU was established, with the joint aims of meeting increasing demands of access and of creating a competitive environment to increase standards across Turkey's higher education sector (Usdiken, Topaler, & Koçak, 2013, p. 201).

From the beginning, the sector was dominated by business and investment groups, with the biggest, Bilkent Holding, Sabanci Holding, and Koç Holding, establishing the first FUs in the wake of the 1983 legislation. Having political and economic power, these pioneers imprinted their organization's already existing features onto the identity of their newly founded FUs. In so doing, they molded the identity of this new organizational form to a great extent.

As more FUs have come into existence, other factors conditioned by each institution's particular founder have contributed to the development of their organizational identities. Thus, Turkish FUs can be categorized according to their founders, as follows: those founded and supported by powerful institutions (holding), such as Koc, Sabanci, and Acibadem; those established by institutional and long-standing education foundations, such as Bilkent, Isik, and Galatasaray; and those set up by entrepreneurs and other third parties or organizations. Over the past three decades, a total of 75 FUs have been established. However, in 2016, following the July 15 military coup attempt, 15 FUs were closed by the AKP government. During the period of this study's data collection, a total number of 60 FUs were providing higher education in Turkey; currently, that number is 67.

Within this context, Turkey's 1982 Constitution established the Council of Higher Education, Turkey (YOK) as the central planner, manager, and governing authority over the higher education system in Turkey. As the dominant actor in the higher education field, YOK continuously adds or drops organizational forms, shaping the field by implementing current policies and strategies. In their analysis of the diversity of the Turkish university form after the "YOK regime," Usdiken and colleagues (2013) put forward that the intervention of YOK into the higher education field "force[d] sameness through imposing a range of strict requirements and created possibilities for competitive differentiation" (p. 187) by introducing marketization mechanisms in the field. To Usdiken et al., FUs are particularly shaped by market conditions, as they lack the historical roots and stories that state universities have developed over time. Nevertheless, their findings show evidence of mimesis of successful state institutions—that pioneers of the FU, such as Bilkent, followed the state leaders in the field, those that can be labeled as semi-technical universities practicing institution-wide foreign language instruction (such as Middle East

Technical University and Bogazici University). The findings also indicate that FUs have not only imitated state pioneers but also have shown a great tendency to imitate one another as they compete under market conditions (Usdiken et al., 2013).

### ***The Role of Social Media Platforms in Online Identity Construction***

As the number of FUs in Turkey increased between 1984 and 2016, universities gradually began to be managed as private companies replete with neoliberal urges and thus entered into a tough competition to increase their student populations. In this pursuit, universities started to use various marketing avenues. Today university websites and social media platforms (SMPs) have become two of the most extensively used communication and marketing methods. SMPs, in particular, have become a highly significant communication medium for universities, preferred because of their ability to be accessed and to provide updates 24/7, offering easy and speedy communication without time and place restraints. Indeed, SMPs have been widely embraced by FUs in Turkey in recent years.

Although FUs in Turkey use SMPs with enthusiasm, the research on how FUs construct online identities by using SMPs is unexplored. While Mızıkacı (2010) discusses the institutional isomorphism process of FUs, Usdiken and colleagues (2013) examine the variations in the university form before and after the YOK regime. Other than these studies, there is a dearth of work in the area of Turkey's FU identity construction.

Considering the research gap in FU identity construction in general and online identity construction through SMPs in higher education in particular, this study aims to delineate and explore the main themes used by FUs in their identity construction via SMPs as well as this communication tool's emergence as a significant new actor in Turkish higher education. In particular, the study examines the institutional themes FUs in Turkey promote in their Facebook (FB) and Twitter accounts. Therefore, this study aims to unpack the role of institutional pressures in online identity construction of FUs through their communication efforts on SMPs.

### **Methodology**

Language is considered a "manifestation of cultural values" (Sundaramurthy & Kreiner, 2008, p. 419), and it is a vital tool for developing meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Therefore, to determine identity elements, analysis of communicated language is essential. The literature proposes that research on corporate identity should be conducted through quantitative analysis, as it requires determining identity statements from the relevant organization's "factual corporate identity" (Van Rekom, 1997, p. 415). In line with this argument, many other studies highlight that qualitative methodology is one of the most widely used methods of analysis to derive insights from organizations (Bonsón-Ponte, Escobar-Rodríguez, & Flores-Muñoz, 2008; Ettredge, Richardson, & Scholz, 2001; Gallego-Alvarez, Rodriguez-Dominguez, & Garcia-Sanchez, 2011). Therefore, the qualitative methodology is adopted and content analysis is used in this study.

### **Research Design**

The field of higher education is the object of analysis chosen in this study. A three-month period of FB and Twitter messages generated by FUs is our data set. Because the study aims to understand online identity construction, we decided to examine the social media accounts that will best reveal the online identities of the organizations. The analysis of a large amount of communicated texts gathered from the FB and Twitter accounts of FUs have enabled us to determine and distinguish the identity themes clearly.

Social media offers significant communication platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) for FUs. SMPs play the role of communication platforms through which FUs can easily express themselves to various stakeholders. Many universities have SMP accounts designed for their current students or alumni to exchange ideas and to give information about the universities' current social and academic events. Because of its simplicity, versatility, and efficacy in reaching prospective students and potential academic staff, the question of manageability of online identity still remains an area of investigation.

#### ***Data Sources and Procedure***

All 75 FUs in Turkish higher education were included in the initial analysis of this study with the raw data collected from those 75 universities' FB and Twitter accounts. Table 1 presents the descriptive analytics of the study sample.

***Table 1. Descriptive Analytics of the Study Sample.***

<b>Time Intervals</b>	<b>Number of FUs Established</b>
1980–1985	1
1986–1990	—
1991–1995	4
1996–2000	14
2001–2005	5
2006–2010	20
2011–2015	11
<b>Cities</b>	<b>Frequency of FUs Established</b>
İstanbul	34
Ankara	9
İzmir	2
Mersin	2
Antalya	2
Konya	2
Gaziantep	2
Kayseri	1
Trabzon	1



Upon examining the descriptive analytics of the study sample, it is evident that the number of FUs increased significantly after 1996. Although there has been a decrease in the number of FUs established between 2001 and 2005, 90.9% of FUs were established after 1996—in other words, within the last 20 years. In addition to the distribution of FUs established according to year, it is understood that the geographic distribution of FUs is not homogeneous. Fifty-five FUs were established in nine cities and most were concentrated in Istanbul (61.8%) and the capital city of Ankara (16.3%).

Because FB posts and tweets were collected every month from each institution, the data set soon became unmanageable. Therefore, we decided to limit the data collection to a three-month period. May, June, and July 2016 posts and tweets were collected, and this period was selected to include a month during which educational activities take place (May), a holiday season during which most university activities are halted (June), and a period when summer activities occur (July). With the analysis of a consecutive three-month period, the study also aimed to observe periodic differences in the content of data collected. A total of 18.462 posts and tweets were analyzed. Table 2 presents the distribution of the collected data.

**Table 2. The Distribution of the Collected Data.**

<b>Months</b>	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Twitter</b>
May	3.185	4.088
June	2.066	2.432
July	3.135	3.556
<b>Total</b>	<b>8.386</b>	<b>10.076</b>

First, the posts and tweets belonging to May, June, and July, which were taken from the official FB and Twitter accounts of all the universities, were copied and recorded separately. Second, the data content was examined individually to identify main themes through detailed readings. During the preliminary readings and identification of the main themes, we observed that most of the posts and tweets, as well as the main themes employed in the universities' FB and Twitter accounts, are identical. The universities' FB and Twitter usage was examined, and it was found that more than half (55%) of the analyzed universities with both FB and Twitter accounts publish more tweets than FB posts. Only 22% of the universities have an equal balance between the use of both accounts, and 23% have more FB posts than tweets. From these initial results, it is evident that FUs generally prefer Twitter over FB when communicating with their audiences. The initial analysis showed that 3 of 75 universities do not have official Twitter accounts, and 3 more have a Twitter account but did not use it during the period of analysis. Therefore, FB and Twitter account usage comparison was made over a total of 69 universities that posted on both FB and Twitter during the three-month period of analysis.

No additional themes were generated from the FB accounts, whereas additional themes emerged from the Twitter accounts, and the number of tweets posted during the three-month analysis period was considerably higher than the number of FB posts. Considering these initial findings, and to increase the

accuracy of the coding process with a manageable amount of data, we decided to include only tweets in the final coding and analysis process.

### ***Coding and Data Analysis***

We studied the content through detailed readings and created general recurring themes independently, and then discussed the general themes and compared individual analyses until mutual agreement was achieved. Following agreement on the coding themes, we independently coded a one-month period of tweets from five randomly selected universities one university at a time. After each coding, we reviewed the content together to identify variances. Through this process, we developed the coding scheme by clarifying the theme scope and description. In addition, this process of intensive mutual coding with discussions enabled intercoder consistency. The coding process was completed according to the final coding scheme.

After all the coding processes were complete, we studied the coded content and merged the associated themes under main theme categories. Five main theme categories were derived that also represent the purpose of the communicated message. These five theme categories are public relations (PR), shareholder engagement, cultivating culture, academic accumulation and output, and information sharing.

A content analysis conducted within the scope of the study was done on a thematic basis, meaning that themes were identified in each text block of coded tweets under related theme categories. Therefore, if a tweet consisted of more than one theme, it was coded under more than one theme. For this reason, the number of tweets examined and the number of the themes coded is not the same. For example, the tweet "Our faculty member . . . , giving a lecture to the educators of . . . high school" was coded under two themes: academic pursuits/events and announcements about affiliated and other institutions. Similarly, a tweet such as "Our faculty member . . . published an article titled . . . in one of the top journals . . . We congratulate him on his current success and wish him future success" was coded under two themes: publications and recognition.

Finally, although 69 universities had active official Twitter accounts in use and were part of the analysis undertaken, the results obtained from 15 universities closed by the AKP government after the June 15 military coup attempt were excluded, as they can no longer be said to be representative of higher education in Turkey. Consequently, the results presented in the following section reflect the results generated from 54 universities.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The initial analysis conducted on the FB and Twitter accounts of the 75 FUs reveals that universities operating in the Turkish higher education sector have a tendency to communicate with their publics through their Twitter accounts. This might be due to the comparatively more dynamic nature of Twitter as well as the fact that millennials seem to prefer Twitter over FB.

To provide an answer to the study's first research question, which aims to understand the role of social media in the identity construction of FUs in Turkish higher education, the percentage weights of each theme generated were calculated. Table 3 presents the findings.

**Table 3. The Percentage Weights of Themes Used by FUs.**

Themes	May	June	July	Three-Month Total
Community Engagement	4	8	5	5
Social Sensitivity Messages	—	3	4	2
Important Days	7	4	2	4
Corporate Social Responsibility	4	3	1	2
Publicity Events	9	19	66	37
Motivation Messages	5	8	1	4
Recognition	7	5	5	6
Art Activities	7	2	—	3
Social Activities	8	2	1	3
Sport Activities	5	2	1	2
Education Activities	3	3	2	2
Academic Pursuits/Events	23	11	3	11
Collaborations and Agreements	2	4	1	2
Projects	3	3	1	2
Publications	1	1	1	1
General Announcements	9	16	6	9
Announcements About Affiliated and Other Institutions	1	3	1	1
Job Postings or Announcements	—	1	—	—
Today-in-History and Quotes	2	3	1	1

When we look at Table 3, the general trend suggests that from May to July there is a decrease in the weight of academic pursuits/events and other activities, such as art, sports, and social activities, and an increase in publicity events. This result indicates that the publics FUs communicate to through their social media accounts differ on a monthly basis, as the communication of academic pursuits/events and other activity themes mainly address current students, and publicity events mainly address prospective students and their families (i.e., a wider audience). Nevertheless, the theme of publicity events remains important, even when results from the months of May and June are considered. Therefore, it can be concluded that the main themes FUs use are publicity events, academic pursuits/events, and general announcements for their online presence.

We examined individual FU profiles to further evaluate the results. Among the FUs analyzed ( $n = 54$ : excluding the 15 universities that have been closed, 3 universities that do not have official Twitter accounts, and 3 universities that did not have tweets in their accounts during the data collection period), 9 universities (16%) emphasize the academic pursuits/events theme more than the publicity events theme. In addition, although 12 FUs emphasize publicity events more than the other themes, the

emphasis placed on both academic pursuits/events and publicity events was observed to be very close (fewer than 10%). Therefore, it can be concluded that 21 FUs (38%) value the academic pursuits/events theme more than the publicity events theme when constructing their online identities.

Study results also reveal that 58% of FUs (n = 69: excluding universities that did not have official Twitter accounts and 3 universities that did not have tweets in their accounts during the data collection period) established before the year 2000 emphasize academic pursuits/events more than publicity events. On the other hand, only 28% of FUs established after the year 2000 emphasize academic pursuits/events more than publicity events. This may be because those FUs established before the year 2000 have already been known and recognized by the publics and/or that prospective students are naturally oriented toward those high-ranking FUs in university selection.

As presented in Table 3, when examined individually on a monthly basis, the weights of the themes used by the FUs vary among May, June, and July. The most obvious difference in the results of the analysis for each month is the concentration of academic pursuits/events and publicity events themes. According to the analysis results for May (when the academic year and the second semester were not yet complete and classes continued), it is observed that FUs predominantly use the academic pursuits/events theme (23%) over the publicity events theme (9%). For the month of June, however, the weight of both themes is similar, but the weight of the publicity events theme (19%) outnumbers the academic pursuits/events theme (11%). For July, there is a substantial increase in focus on the publicity events theme (66%). We find that the observed result in this month is an extreme value and suggests that this substantial increase is not indicated because it coincides with the university selection period right after the Student Selection and Placement Test conducted by the YOK (Council of Higher Education, 2017). We surmise that the publicity events theme would not be emphasized with such weight if the analysis was carried out with the data collected from outside the study's three-month period.

When we look at the total theme weights of the three-month period, the impression that FUs use the publicity events theme (37%) might prevail. However, as we have argued, the extreme value for publicity events observed in July may be skewing the final analysis; consequently, our findings reveal that FUs use social media, specifically Twitter, to share information about publicity events and academic pursuits/events and to make general announcements.

To observe in greater detail how FUs construct their online identities, we merged discrete themes under a set of major theme categories: PR, emotional attachment, cultivating culture, academic accumulation and output, and information sharing. The percentage weights of each theme category were calculated and are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4. The Percentage Weights of Theme Categories Used by FUs.**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>June</b>	<b>July</b>	<b>Three-Month Total</b>
PR	24	38	77	52
Emotional Attachment	12	13	6	10
Cultivating Culture	20	6	2	8

Academic Accumulation and Output	33	22	8	19
Information Sharing	10	20	7	10

According to the study results, FUs tend to construct their online identities by using five main theme categories. The PR theme categories include emotional attachment (10%), social sensitivity messages (4%), important days (8%), corporate social responsibility (4%), and publicity events (74%). The study results reveal that the major theme emphasized within this category is publicity events. However, the publicity events theme represents 74% of this theme category while the remaining discrete themes represent only 26%.

The emotional attachment category includes motivation messages (40%) and recognition (60%) themes. The cultivating culture category includes art activities (38%), social activities (38%), and sports activities (24%) themes. The academic accumulation and output theme category includes education activities (11%), academic pursuits/events (61%), collaboration and agreements (11%), projects (11%), and publications (6%). For this same theme category, academic pursuits/events represents 61% while the remaining themes represent only 39%. Finally, the information sharing theme category includes the two themes of general announcements (90%) and announcements about affiliated and other institutions (1%).

Within the theme category of academic accumulation and output, academic pursuits/events was predominantly emphasized (61%), although this theme category consists of other themes, such as academic activities, collaborations and agreements, projects, and publications, which directly relate to the main reason for the existence of a university. This result indicates that FUs essentially promote and communicate information about conferences, congresses, and workshops hosted by the university rather than highlighting the main academic outputs, such as publications and projects. When the results presented up to this point are considered in general, the impression is that the communicated content is determined according to the communicated stakeholders and to whom the communication is directed, although the main reason for existence for a university is to perform education and research.

### ***Theoretical Contributions***

Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (p. 46). Concordantly, Amaral, Jones, and Karseth (2002) identify students, parents of students, academics, employees, the state, and higher education institutions as the stakeholders of higher education, and they differentiate internal stakeholders as "members of the academic community" and external stakeholders as "outside the university" (p. 2). Based on these definitions, current students, their families, faculty members, academic and administrative staff, and other employees constitute internal stakeholders, as they are directly affected by the institution's actions.

It is evident from Table 4 that FUs address different stakeholders at different times. Because each stakeholder has diverse expectations and interests, FUs address their interests through various theme categories. When those theme categories are evaluated, we can see that the PR theme category addresses external stakeholders while the theme categories of emotional attachment, cultivating culture, and academic

accumulation and output address internal stakeholders. Finally, the theme category of information sharing addresses both internal and external stakeholders.

FUs communicate their distinctive identity elements to both their internal and their external stakeholders. For internal stakeholders, FUs aim to strengthen perceptions of unique institutional identity. FUs also need to communicate their distinctive identity themes with their external stakeholders to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Constructing this distinctive identity requires communicating these unique characteristics and persuading the audience. On this basis, the following two propositions have been generated:

*Proposition 1: Organizations need to communicate distinctive identity elements with their external stakeholders to construct a unique organizational identity. Therefore, the main intention of communication with external stakeholders is to reveal important qualities of the organization and to persuade stakeholders of institutional value.*

*Proposition 2: Organizations need to communicate distinctive identity elements to their internal stakeholders to further strengthen organizational identity. Therefore, the reinforcement of organizational identity is the main intention of communication with internal stakeholders.*

The study's second research question aims to understand the role of institutional pressures in online identity construction of FUs in Turkish higher education. As Pedersen and Dobbin (2006) argue, constructing a distinctive identity and ensuring legitimacy through isomorphism is the main dilemma facing organizations. It is clear that organizations must both imitate industry norms and yet differentiate themselves sufficiently so as to be perceived as unique (Pedersen & Dobbin, 2006). It appears to be a great challenge for organizations to provide these two elements, which are contradictory to each other.

As noted in the theoretical background section, the number of universities (along with FUs) rapidly increased throughout Turkey after the year 2000 because of demographic pressures and growing demand (Küskü, 2003). Alongside these developments, universities began to change their focus from nonprofit organizations providing a public service to profit-making entities; as Küskü argues, "universities are gradually being considered as institutions functioning in line with market conditions" (p. 349). At the same time, despite efforts by FUs to provide superior resources and education, "there is a belief among the Turkish public that some of these private universities still do not provide a high quality of education" (Atakan & Eker, 2007, p. 56). Consequently, establishing and maintaining legitimacy is one of the major issues FUs face to survive and stay in the competition.

As discussed in the theoretical background section, institutional theory suggests that organizations are subject to socially constructed institutional pressures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and adaption to these institutional rules and regulations is crucial for gaining legitimacy (Kondra & Hinnings, 1998). According to institutional theory, adaptation to the environment is instrumental through mechanisms of coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As legal requirements and regulations are enforced by the YOK, FUs seem to mimic one another's communication patterns and content and to seek conformity with the social norms. Thus, all coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism mechanisms appear to be applied for an instrumental purpose.

In addition, because internal stakeholders already accept the legitimacy of their affiliated institutions, it would seem that communication efforts to construct a legitimate identity should be directed toward external stakeholders. The study results support this argument, as FUs follow the same communication patterns and use the same theme categories throughout the content analyzed here. Consequently, it can be proposed that universities need to construct a legitimate identity by communicating identity themes consistent with industry norms, which in turn results in isomorphism in the organizational identity, and that identity is communicated to external stakeholders.

*Proposition 3: Because organizations need to ensure legitimacy through isomorphism mechanisms to survive, they need to communicate identity themes that are consistent with industry norms with their external stakeholders through mimetic and normative isomorphism.*

This article contributes to the organizational identity literature by determining the major themes used by FUs in their online identity constructions. Distinguishing these identity themes enables us to reveal the general patterns of communication with internal and external stakeholders and to draw inferences about online identity construction from an institutional theory perspective.

### **Conclusions**

This study presents findings in the search for how FUs construct distinct online identities under the institutional pressures that direct them toward isomorphism. The first finding put forward that FUs construct their online identities by using 19 themes. Of these 19 themes, FUs predominantly communicate and emphasize the three themes of publicity events, academic pursuits/events, and general announcements. This result indicates that FUs are still at an early stage in their online identity construction; therefore, they concentrate their communicative practice on explaining themselves by emphasizing what they do, who they are, and their academic agendas, including institutionally based congresses, conferences, and workshops.

The primary reason for universities' existence is to provide education (education activities), conduct research (publications and projects), and generate knowledge rather than to organize academic pursuits/events or publicity events. However, the content communicated through social media accounts creates an impression that the main objective of FUs is to organize publicity and academic events. This might be due to the uncertainty in the institutional environment, as online communication through social media accounts has evolved in recent years and industry norms have not yet been sufficiently developed to guide online identity construction where FUs mimic common communication patterns. Another, perhaps more compelling, reason might be the educational backgrounds of the actors who are responsible for the online communication content; they are generally communication faculty graduates who focus on publicity. This might indicate that communicated content of FUs diffuse through normative isomorphism.

Gaining legitimacy for FUs seems to overrule all other intentions when communication efforts are directed toward external stakeholders. The reason behind this might be the common belief that FUs are profit-seeking entities when placed in opposition to older, more established, nonprofit (state universities) providers of education. Therefore, FUs have to prove themselves as legitimate and must compete with other FUs and with

those state universities that enjoy a solid historical and constitutional background. Under these institutional pressures, FUs have to conform to widely accepted practices and emphasize identity themes consistent with other universities; this process leads to isomorphism. However, FUs also need to differentiate themselves to be able to compete with their rivals. This dilemma creates tension within the online identity construction practices of FUs. This study contributes to the literature by proposing that to overcome this dilemma, FUs concentrate their communication efforts mainly on external stakeholders and communicate both distinctive identity elements through persuasion to be able to stay competitive and identity elements consistent with industry norms through mimetic and normative isomorphism to gain legitimacy.

Another important implication gleaned from the study is that FUs communicate five major theme categories to their stakeholders. The PR theme category addresses external stakeholders; the theme categories of emotional attachment, cultivating culture, and academic accumulation and output address internal stakeholders; and the theme category of information sharing addresses both internal and external stakeholders. This finding is an important contribution to the literature because it enables researchers to identify the underlying intention of each communicated theme category. On the one hand, because the PR theme category addresses external stakeholders, the aim of this communication effort concentrates on self-description and explanation through persuasion. However, because the emotional attachment, cultivating culture, and academic accumulation and output theme categories address internal stakeholders, the intention of the communication effort is to reinforce and strengthen distinctive identity elements.

This study investigates the content of FU social media accounts over a three-month period. Future studies could examine a longer time span with a longitudinal analysis to identify periodic variations of communicated content. Furthermore, although it is not the main focus of this study, there are several challenges university students face in expressing their social and political ideas, along with direct and indirect censorship. Future studies could examine these sensitive topics, such as censorship, to enlighten the extent and process of self-expression of university students.

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