



## A Multidimensional Analysis of Identity Construction Among University Youth: An Evaluation in the Context of Tradition, Modernization, and Belonging

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### Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted nature of identity attitudes among university students within the context of modernization and social transformation. Drawing on sociological approaches developed by Erik Erikson, Henri Tajfel, Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall, and Anthony Giddens, identity is conceptualized as a dynamic and socially constructed process shaped by multiple forms of belonging, such as ethnicity, nation, religion, politics, and gender. The university environment is considered a critical social space where these dimensions of identity are negotiated and reproduced. The relationships between students' demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, faculty, and academic year) and their identity attitudes were investigated. The study concluded that family and societal values play a significant role in shaping students' identity perceptions, and that trends towards modernization and individualization also have a considerable impact on identity attitudes. The study found no statistically significant differences in identity attitudes based on variables such as gender, age, marital status, or faculty. However, a significant difference was found in terms of nationality and ethnicity. Overall, the findings indicate that students maintain traditional forms of belonging while simultaneously pursuing their individual identity quests.

### Keywords

Identity Construction, Identity Attitudes, Tradition, Modernization, Belonging

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## Üniversite Gençliğinde Kimlik İnşasının Çok Boyutlu Analizi: Gelenek, Modernleşme ve Aidiyet Ekseninde Bir Değerlendirme

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### Öz

Bu çalışma, üniversite gençliği arasında kimlik tutumlarının çok boyutlu yapısını modernleşme ve toplumsal dönüşüm bağlamında incelemektedir. Erik Erikson, Henri Tajfel, Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall ve Anthony Giddens tarafından geliştirilen sosyolojik yaklaşımlardan hareketle kimlik; etnisite, ulus, din, siyaset ve toplumsal cinsiyet gibi çoklu aidiyet biçimleri tarafından şekillenen, dinamik ve toplumsal olarak inşa edilen bir süreç olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Üniversite ortamı ise bu kimlik boyutlarının müzakere edildiği ve yeniden üretildiği kritik bir toplumsal alan olarak ele alınmaktadır. Öğrencilerin demografik özellikleri (cinsiyet, yaş, fakülte ve öğrenim yılı gibi) ile kimlik tutumları arasındaki ilişkiler incelenmiştir. Aile ve toplumsal değerlerin öğrencilerin kimlik algılarını şekillendirmede önemli bir rol oynadığı, modernleşme ve bireyselleşme eğilimlerinin de kimlik tutumları üzerinde kayda değer bir etkiye sahip olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Kimlik tutumlarının cinsiyet, yaş, medeni durum veya fakülte gibi değişkenlere göre istatistiksel olarak anlamlı farklılıklar göstermediği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Bununla birlikte, milliyet ve etnik köken açısından anlamlı bir farklılık bulunmuştur. Genel olarak, bulgular öğrencilerin geleneksel aidiyet biçimlerini korurken aynı zamanda bireysel kimlik arayışlarını sürdürdüklerini göstermektedir.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Kimlik İnşası, Kimlik Tutumu, Gelenek, Modernleşme, Aidiyet

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## Introduction

Identity is a concept that gains meaning at both individual and social levels through the answers individuals give to the questions “Who am I?” and “Who are we?”. Identity can be defined as the ways in which individuals describe<sup>2</sup> and position themselves within society<sup>3</sup>. From a sociological perspective, identity functions as a mirror reflecting individuals’ social roles, forms of belonging, and interactions with social structures. Identity attitudes, in this sense, refer to the positive or negative orientations individuals develop toward different identity categories. In contemporary societies, multiculturalism, globalization, and the widespread use of digital communication technologies have contributed to the increasing complexity and dynamism of identity attitudes<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, identity is no longer viewed solely as an individual attribute but rather as a process shaped by social interaction and power relations.

In principle, identity refers to the complex ways in which we perceive who we are and how we believe others perceive us. It emerges through processes of socialization during youth, as well as through interactions with culture, context, and other people, and—albeit less frequently emphasized in sociology—through biological, psychological, and genetic factors. One of the main challenges in discussing identity lies in balancing biological or genetic influences with broader environmental contexts that shape who we are as social beings. Although this balance is not always easy to establish, sociologists focus on understanding how social interaction operates and how it shapes individuals’ perceptions of themselves and the roles they perform in everyday life<sup>5</sup>.

Within the sociology of identity, various theoretical approaches have been developed. Erikson’s psychosocial development theory conceptualizes identity as a lifelong developmental process<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory defines identity through group membership, emphasizing how belonging to social groups shapes attitudes and behaviors toward both in-groups and out-groups<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton Susan, “Environmental Identity: A Conceptual and Operational Definition”, *Identity and The Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature*, ed. Susan Clayton, Susan Opatow (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 45-65.

<sup>2</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Lou Xiaobin – Li Liman Man, “The Relationship Between Identity and Environmental Concern: A Meta Analysis”, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 76/4 (2021), 18-32.

<sup>4</sup> Hall Stuart, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222-237.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Osbaldiston, “Identity, Self, and Culture in Classical and Contemporary Sociology”, *Exploring Sociology in The Antipodes: Introduction To Sociology*, ed. Tanya Petray, Nick Osbaldiston (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Tajfel – John Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict”, *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G. Austin, Samuel Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1974), 33-47.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field provide a valuable framework for understanding how identity attitudes are structured through social conditions and cultural capital. Identity processes continue to evolve throughout the life course, but they acquire particular significance during adolescence—a period characterized by intense physical, psychological, and social change<sup>8</sup>. These perspectives demonstrate that identity attitudes are not solely rooted in individual psychology but are deeply embedded in social structures and cultural contexts<sup>9</sup>.

Identity attitudes influence how individuals perceive themselves and others. While positive attitudes foster social cohesion, tolerance, and a culture of coexistence, negative attitudes may lead to discrimination, othering, and social polarization. Therefore, a sociological analysis of identity attitudes plays a crucial role in understanding the impact of social values, norms, and cultural interactions on individuals.

### 1. Identity Attitudes: From Individual Perception to Social Perception

Gender construction refers to individuals' perceptions and attitudes toward socially constructed roles associated with femininity and masculinity. Gender inequality and normative expectations significantly shape identity attitudes<sup>10</sup>. Feminist movements and struggles for gender equality have played an important role in transforming these attitudes. Research indicates that in societies where gender norms are strongly institutionalized, attitudes toward gender identity tend to be more rigid and stereotypical<sup>11</sup>. Perceptions of femininity and masculinity are continuously reproduced through education, media representations, and everyday social interactions<sup>12</sup>. Although gender identity is formed through gendered subjectivity, this constitutive relationship remains ambiguous. While gender subjectivity may limit the range of livable gender identities, it is often compatible with more than one form of identity expression<sup>13</sup>.

Ethnic identity is a socially constructed process through which individuals identify with a particular ethnic group. In periods of social uncertainty or crisis, ethnic identity may serve as a unifying function. Attitudes toward ethnic identity are shaped by factors such as ethnic diversity, discrimination, racism, and cultural interaction<sup>14</sup>. In multi-ethnic societies

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique Of The Judgement Of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> De Lise Francesca vd., "Identity Matters For Well-Being: Longitudinal Associations Between Identity Processes and Well-Being in Adolescents With Different Cultural Backgrounds", *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 53 (2024), 910–926.

<sup>10</sup> Fatma Çekiç, "Toplumsal Cinsiyet Temelli Kimlik İnşası: Erkeklik Kimliğinin Sosyolojik Analizi", *Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 11/2 (2021), 45–62.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Florence Ashley, "What is it Like to Have a Gender Identity?", *Mind* 132/528 (2013), 1053–1073.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas D. Steensma vd., "Gender Identity Development in Adolescence", *Hormones and Behavior* 64/2 (2013) 288–297.

<sup>14</sup> Celalettin Yanık, "Etnisite, Kimlik ve Milliyetçilik Kavramlarının Sosyolojik Analizi", *Kaygı. Bursa Uludağ Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Felsefe Dergisi* 20 (2013), 225–237.

such as Türkiye, ethnic identity attitudes play a decisive role in processes of social cohesion and conflict. Studies suggest that while strong ethnic identity awareness can enhance intra-group solidarity, it may also intensify prejudices toward other groups<sup>15</sup>.

National identity refers to individuals' identification with the nation to which they belong. Attitudes toward national identity are influenced by nationalism, citizenship rights, national values, and cultural heritage<sup>16</sup>. While a strong national identity can reinforce feelings of social belonging, it may also give rise to exclusionary attitudes toward different ethnic or cultural groups. Nationalist discourse and political propaganda can profoundly shape individuals' national identity attitudes.

Religious identity encompasses individuals' identification with specific religious beliefs and practices. Attitudes toward religious identity are influenced by factors such as religious freedom, tolerance, secularism, and social norms. While religious identity reflects individuals' spiritual values, it can also become a source of social conflict and intolerance<sup>17</sup>. Social research indicates that individuals with strong religious affiliation often adhere more closely to their group norms and may, at times, develop prejudiced attitudes toward members of other religious groups.

Political identity has a fluid and dynamic structure. It is defined through social and political values and principles that express individuals' political orientations, as well as through identification with political ideologies or party affiliations. Attitudes toward political identity are shaped by democratic values, electoral processes, political polarization, and social movements<sup>18</sup>.

## 2. Identity Construction Dynamics Among University Youth: Empirical Findings in the Context of Belonging, Difference, and Social Structuring

The reliability analysis revealed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .920, indicating a high level of internal consistency for the measurement scale<sup>19</sup>. The results of the normality test (Skewness = 0.71; Kurtosis = 0.67) demonstrate that the data conform to a normal distribution. This finding supports the appropriateness of applying parametric statistical tests, such as the t-test and ANOVA, in the analysis<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Akif Akto, "Attitudes Toward Ethnic Identities From The Perspective Of Values", *Journal of Dicle University Ziya Gökalp Faculty of Education* 22 (2014), 214–229.

<sup>16</sup> Didem Varol, "Kimlik Gelişiminde Sosyal Bağlamın Rolü Üzerine Bir İnceleme", *İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi Eğitim Dergisi* 5/1 (2023), 33–47.

<sup>17</sup> Akto, "Attitudes Toward Ethnic Identities From The Perspective of Values".

<sup>18</sup> Fatih Yazıcı, "Kimlik Tutumları Ölçeği: Bir Ölçek Geliştirme Çalışması", *Cumhuriyet International Journal of Education* 5/4 (2016), 41–54.

<sup>19</sup> Şener Büyükköztürk, *Sosyal Bilimler İçin Veri Analizi El Kitabı: İstatistik, Araştırma Deseni, SPSS Uygulamaları ve Yorum* (Ankara: Pegem Akademi Yayıncılık, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Şeref Kalaycı, *SPSS Uygulamalı Çok Değişkenli İstatistik Teknikleri* (Ankara: Dinamik Akademi Yayıncılık, 2010).

**Table 1.** The Social Field of Participants: Demographic Distribution and Identity Context

Demographic Variable	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	247	36.3
Male	433	63.7
<b>Age</b>		
18 and below	206	30.3
19–30	418	61.5
31 and above	56	8.2
<b>Faculty</b>		
Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences	189	29.6
Faculty of Arts and Sciences	173	27.9
Faculty of Education	152	23.2
Faculty of Engineering	21	3.3
Faculty of Sports Sciences	85	13.7
<b>Nationality / Ethnic Background</b>		
Turkish	237	34.9
Kurdish	211	31.0
Arab / Zaza	121	17.8
Other (Foreign nationals)	111	16.3
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	666	97.9
Married	14	2.1

The participants consisted of 63.7% males and 36.3% females. In terms of age distribution, the highest proportion of participants (61.5%) fell within the 19–30 age group. The vast majority of the participants were single (97.9%), and the faculty distribution indicated that students from the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences constituted the largest group. Regarding nationality/ethnic background, 34.9% of the participants identified as Turkish, 31.0% as Kurdish, 17.8% as Arab/Zaza, and 16.3% as foreign nationals. This distribution suggests that the sample reflects the heterogeneous structure of the university youth population.

**Table 2.** Differences in Identity Attitudes Across Sociodemographic Variables

Variable	p-value	Result
Gender	0.144	No significant difference
Age	0.393	No significant difference
Marital Status	0.854	No significant difference
Faculty	0.223	No significant difference
Nationality/Ethnic Background	0.000	Significant difference

According to the results of the t-test and ANOVA, no statistically significant differences were found between identity attitudes and the variables of gender, age, faculty, and marital status ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, a statistically significant difference was identified between nationality/ethnic background and identity attitudes ( $p < 0.001$ ). This finding indicates that ethnic background is a determining factor in identity perceptions. Indeed, the literature also emphasizes that ethnic identity strongly influences young people's forms of social belonging<sup>21</sup> (Yazıcı, 2016).

**Table 3.** Structural Components of Identity Attitudes in Late Modern Context

Factors	Factor Loading (Cronbach's Alpha)
Political identity attitude	0.881
Gender identity attitude	0.835
Religious identity attitude	0.808
Ethnic identity attitude	0.762
National identity attitude	0.589
Explained Variance	61.057%

The KMO value of 0.802 and the Bartlett's test result ( $\chi^2 = 1465.015$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) indicate that the data are suitable for factor analysis. As a result of the factor analysis, five sub-dimensions were identified. These five factors explain 61.057% of the total variance. The findings demonstrate that identity attitudes do not have a unidimensional structure but rather a multidimensional one.

**Table 4.** Relational Dynamics Among Identity Sub-Dimensions

Correlation	Identity Attitudes	National Identity Attitude	Ethnic Identity Attitude	Political Identity Attitude	Religious Identity Attitude	Gender Identity Attitude
Identity Attitudes	Pearson Correlation	1				
National Identity Attitude	Pearson Correlation	.530**	1			
Ethnic Identity Attitude	Pearson Correlation	.697**	.445**	1		
Political Identity Attitude	Pearson Correlation	.854**	.412**	.597**	1	

<sup>21</sup> YAZICI, "Kimlik Tutumları Ölçeği: Bir Ölçek Geliştirme Çalışması", 41-54.

Correlation	Identity Attitudes	National Identity Attitude	Ethnic Identity Attitude	Political Identity Attitude	Religious Identity Attitude	Gender Identity Attitude
Religious Identity Attitude	Pearson Correlation	.827**	.236**	.454**	.699**	1
Gender Identity	Pearson Corr	.900**	.380**	.490**	.655**	.668**

Positive and statistically significant relationships were found between identity attitudes and all of their sub-dimensions ( $r = 0.530-0.900$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). In particular, the relationship between overall identity attitudes and gender identity attitude was very strong ( $r = 0.900$ ). This result indicates that gender roles are an important determinant in young people’s identity perceptions. Additionally, political and religious identity attitudes were found to show strong correlations with overall identity attitudes. Overall, high-level positive relationships were observed between identity attitudes and their sub-dimensions ( $r = 0.530-0.900$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), with the strongest association identified for gender identity attitude ( $r = 0.900$ ).

**Table 5.** Social Determinants of Identity Construction: A Regression Analysis

Independent Variables	Beta	p	R <sup>2</sup>	F	p
Constant	1.707	.000	0.065	9,298.	.001
National Identity Attitude	.268	.000			
Ethnic Identity Attitude	-.092	.187			
Political Identity Attitude	-.006	.944			
Religious Identity Attitude	.045	.654			
Gender Identity Attitude	.258	.513			

According to the results of the regression analysis, nationality/ethnic background has a statistically significant effect on identity attitudes ( $R^2 = 0.065$ ;  $F = 9.298$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). This finding indicates that variations in identity attitudes are primarily shaped by ethnic background.<sup>22</sup> The literature similarly emphasizes that ethnic identity plays a central role in determining individuals’ sense of belonging<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs Identity?”, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 1-17.

<sup>23</sup> Ayşe Kadioğlu, Cumhuriyet, *Demokrasi ve Kimlik* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2009).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal that university students' identity attitudes do not display a unidimensional structure; rather, they point to a multilayered process of identity construction in which ethnic, religious, political, national, and gender-based forms of belonging are intertwined. The results indicate that youth identity is simultaneously shaped by traditional social values and by the dynamics of modernization and individualization. This situation is consistent with sociological approaches that emphasize identity<sup>24</sup> in late modern societies as a phenomenon that is not fixed but continuously negotiated<sup>25</sup>.

The absence of significant differences in identity attitudes according to demographic variables such as gender, age, faculty, and marital status suggests that university youth develop similar identity perceptions around certain shared sociocultural commonalities. The common academic experiences, social interaction spaces, and similar life practices offered by the university environment may have led to a relative homogenization of students' identity attitudes. This finding can be interpreted in light of Bourdieu's<sup>26</sup> approach, which argues that modern educational institutions produce similar habitus patterns among individuals.

In contrast, the presence of significant differences in identity attitudes based on nationality/ethnic background demonstrates that ethnic identity occupies a central position in young people's perceptions of belonging. Especially in multi-ethnic social structures, ethnic identity can function as a powerful reference point through which individuals position themselves socially<sup>27</sup>. This result is consistent with studies emphasizing that ethnic identity is not merely a cultural element but also a determinant of social boundaries and group belonging<sup>28</sup>. As Hall<sup>29</sup> argues, identity is constructed through difference, and ethnic belonging constitutes one of the most visible dimensions of these differences.

While the factor analysis results indicate that identity attitudes have a multidimensional structure, the correlation analyses show strong relationships among these dimensions. In particular, the high correlation between gender identity attitudes and overall identity attitudes suggests that gender roles are a significant determinant of young people's self-perceptions<sup>30</sup>. This finding is in line with theoretical perspectives that argue gender is continuously reproduced through social interaction<sup>31</sup>. Gender-based identity attitudes

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", 222-237.

<sup>26</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of The Judgement of Taste*, 1984.

<sup>27</sup> Yanık, "Etnisite, Kimlik ve Milliyetçilik Kavramlarının Sosyolojik Analizi".

<sup>28</sup> Akto, "Attitudes Toward Ethnic Identities From The Perspective Of Values".

<sup>29</sup> Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?"

<sup>30</sup> Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*.

<sup>31</sup> Fatma Çekiç, *Toplumsal Cinsiyet Temelli Kimlik İnşası: Erkeklik Kimliğinin Sosyolojik Analizi*. (Nevşehir: Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Sosyoloji Anabilim Dalı, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, 2021).

among young people are shaped not only by biological differences but also by cultural norms, media representations, and social expectations.

The strong associations observed between religious and political identity attitudes and overall identity perceptions further indicate that ideological and belief-based elements remain influential in the identity construction of university youth. Despite processes of modernization and secularization, the continued significance of religious identity for young people suggests that religion maintains its transformative role in social life. Similarly, the relationship between political identity attitudes and identity perceptions demonstrates that young people are not indifferent to political processes and that political affiliations play an important role in identity construction<sup>32</sup>.

The results of the regression analysis show that ethnic background plays a more decisive role in explaining identity attitudes compared to other identity dimensions. This finding underscores the importance of addressing identity debates in Türkiye within the context of ethnic diversity and social differentiation. The literature frequently emphasizes that in contexts where ethnic identity is strong, both in-group solidarity and tendencies toward othering may intensify<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, understanding the identity attitudes of university youth is also crucial for analyzing social cohesion and practices of coexistence.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that youth identity is not static but rather a structure that transforms alongside processes of social change. University youth attempt to balance traditional values with modern individual orientations, creating a fertile ground for the emergence of multiple and hybrid forms of identity. As emphasized in Inglehart's<sup>34</sup> theory of modernization, value transformations lead to significant shifts in young people's identity attitudes and render new forms of belonging more visible.

In conclusion, the discussion findings demonstrate that university students' identity attitudes are closely related not to individual preferences alone but to social structures, cultural contexts, and historical processes. The sociological analysis of identity attitudes contributes not only to understanding youth but also to anticipating the future directions of society. This study aimed to examine university students' identity attitudes from a sociological perspective and to reveal the multidimensional and dynamic nature of youth identity. Analyses conducted with 680 students studying at Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University demonstrate that identity attitudes are shaped not solely by individual preferences but also by social values, cultural contexts, and structural factors. The findings reveal that both traditional forms of belonging and processes of modernization and individualization simultaneously influence the identity perceptions of university youth.

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<sup>32</sup> Yazıcı, "Kimlik Tutumları Ölçeği: Bir Ölçek Geliştirme Çalışması", 41–54.

<sup>33</sup> Akto, "Attitudes Toward Ethnic Identities From The Perspective of Values".

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

The results indicate that there are no significant differences in identity attitudes according to demographic variables such as gender, age, faculty, and marital status. This suggests that the university environment generates shared experiences and similar social practices among young people, leading to a certain convergence in identity perceptions. As a social space where individuals from different social backgrounds are exposed to similar forms of cultural capital, the university functions as a setting that facilitates the partial standardization of identity attitudes.

The findings further demonstrate that university students' identity attitudes are closely linked to processes of social change. Modernization, globalization, and digitalization intensify young people's efforts to balance traditional values with individual orientations, paving the way for the emergence of hybrid and multilayered identity forms. In this context, university youth exhibit a strong tendency to preserve their sense of social belonging while simultaneously maintaining individual distinctiveness.

In conclusion, this study shows that understanding young people's identity attitudes is not merely an individual issue but one that holds critical importance for comprehending social structures and cultural transformation. While the findings provide an empirical contribution to the literature on youth sociology, they also offer important insights for educational policies, youth studies, and practices focused on social cohesion. Future research that incorporates comparative data from different universities and regional contexts would enable a more comprehensive analysis of the transformation of youth identity and make a significant contribution to the field.

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