




Exploring Turkish Adolescents' Humor Styles and Social-Emotional Skills in Relation to Gender


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Abstract

We conducted this study to explore the relationship between different humor styles and social-emotional competence in terms of gender differences in Turkish adolescents. A total of 504 high school students participated in this descriptive, cross-sectional, and correlational study. The age of the subjects ranged from 15 to 18 years. We used a demographic information form, the Child Humor Styles Questionnaire (CHSQ), and the Social Emotional Competency Questionnaire as data collection tools. The data were analyzed with percentage and mean, *t* test in independent groups, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression analysis. We found a relationship between gender and humor styles and social-emotional competence. We also found that Turkish male adolescents had higher levels of aggressive humor, self-defeating humor, self-awareness, self-management, and taking responsibility. We also found that as adolescents' levels of participatory humor and self-enhancing humor increased, their social awareness significantly increased, while, as their levels of aggressive humor and self-defeating humor increased, their social awareness and self-awareness significantly decreased. Adolescents' gender was related to their humor styles and social-emotional competence. In addition, compatible humor styles supported adolescents' social-emotional competence, whereas incompatible humor styles negatively affected their social-emotional competence.

Keywords: *adolescents, humor styles, social-emotional competence*

Date Submitted: March 16, 2025 | **Date Published:** February 3, 2026

Recommended Citation

Üstündağ, A., Dursun, E., & Avcı, İ. (2026). Exploring Turkish adolescents' humorous styles and social-emotional skills in relation to gender. *Journal of Social, Behavioral, and Health Sciences*, 20, 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.5590/JSBHS.2026.20.1755>

Introduction

Humor, defined as something that is considered funny, amusing, and entertaining (Pandin et al., 2023), is not used only to reflect positive emotions. According to Freud, humor is one of the defense mechanisms a person develops to protect themselves from negative and challenging situations, and Freud argued that people with high levels of intelligence use the humor defense mechanism more often (O'connell, 1969). In other words, from a psychological point of view, humor can be seen as a personal quality to defend oneself against negative emotions, such as stress, anxiety, fear, and worry (Santrock, 2022). In this context, humor can contribute to mental health, healthy relationships, quality of life, good communication, and effective coping strategies (Pandin et al., 2023).

Humor has four styles, depending on whether it is adaptive or maladaptive and whether it is directed at oneself or others; two of the styles are positive, and the other two are negative (Martin & Ford, 2018; Martin et al., 2003). Participatory humor refers to the tendency to say funny things, make jokes, and use spontaneous and creative entertainment to entertain others, attract attention, and reduce tensions that may arise in interpersonal relationships. This style of humor is free of negativity, and its use involves both the person using it and others, which helps to increase interpersonal harmony. Self-enhancing humor refers to the tendency to look at life from a humorous point of view. It means using humor as a method of dealing with difficulties and having fun, even in the face of life's setbacks. Aggressive humor refers to the tendency to use humor to criticize or manipulate others by resorting to sarcasm, offending others with jokes, and insulting or excluding others. Self-defeating humor refers to the tendency to use humor to offend or exclude others at one's own expense.

Many studies have investigated the psychological effects of humor. Research has shown that humor can reduce negative emotions; have a positive effect on negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, and depression; have a positive effect on interpersonal relationships; make a positive contribution to one's life; and have a positive effect on personal development in terms of biological, psychological, social, environmental, and behavioral factors (Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2020; Sánchez et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2019). On the other hand, the negative use of humor has been found to cause an increase in mental health problems in young people and may lead to sleep problems due to negative states such as depression, learning problems, and stress (Almojali et al., 2017; Dalky & Gharaibeh, 2019; Heckman et al., 2014). As the negative use of humor also includes behaviors that can be considered emotional abuse, such as mocking and excluding people, it is necessary to promote the development of social-emotional competence and resilience with which to manage these negative emotions and adapt to different situations (Galante et al., 2018). Resilience is necessary for young people to overcome various problems (Pidgeon et al., 2014).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; n.d.) described socially and emotionally competent young people as those who can understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve goals, solve problems successfully, establish and maintain healthy relationships, and process and store information in an environment that fosters these skills. CASEL (n.d.) operationalizes social and emotional competence in terms of five skills. Self-awareness refers to the ability to recognize and understand one's own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors and to know one's strengths and weaknesses. Self-regulation (or self-management) refers to the ability to regulate one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Social awareness refers to the ability to consider and empathize with the perspectives of others and to understand and comply with social norms. Relationship skills refers to the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships by listening effectively, communicating clearly, and interacting respectfully with others. Responsible decision-making refers to the ability to make respectful and constructive choices about one's behavior and social interactions in different settings and situations.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

A sense of humor is an important part of daily life. Recently, studies have been conducted on this topic to understand how a sense of humor is related to different aspects of life. Various cross-sectional relationships have been established between humor styles and social skills (Amjad & Dasti, 2022; Boerner et al., 2017; Fritz et al., 2017; Giapraki, 2022; Kokkinos et al., 2023). However, no research has been conducted on the importance of gender differences in the relationship between Turkish adolescents' humor style and social-emotional competence. Therefore, the present study used a prospective design to examine the relationships between humor styles and social-emotional competence in high school students and the importance of gender in this relationship. Our aim was to explore the relationship of different humor styles with social-emotional competence and gender differences. The study is based on four sub-hypotheses:

1. Significant differences exist between Turkish adolescent men and women in terms of humor styles.
2. Significant differences exist between Turkish adolescent men and women in terms of social-emotional competence.
3. Gender differences in humor styles are related to social-emotional competence.
4. Gender differences predict the nature of this relationship.

Methods

Research Model and Participants

We conducted this descriptive, cross-sectional, and correlational study between March and June 2024 in Ankara, Türkiye. We selected four high schools using a proportional probability selection method based on the number of students. The sample size was determined using G*Power (Version 3.1.9.7) statistical software, which is used when the population is known. We used a simple random sampling method to select students from the selected schools. In simple random sampling, every possible combination of elements has an equal chance of being included in the sample. A total of 504 high school adolescents participated in the study. Ages of the volunteers ranged from 15 to 18 years old.

The study was carried out following the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. The Health Sciences University Gülhane Scientific Research Ethics Committee approved the study, dated March 19, 2024, and numbered 2024-122. We obtained informed consent to participate from all participants and collected all data anonymously.

Data Collection Tools

We used a demographic information form, the Child Humor Styles Questionnaire (CHSQ), and the Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ) as data collection tools in the study.

Demographic information form: We prepared the information form. It consists of questions about the socio-demographic characteristics of young people.

CHSQ: The scale, adapted into Turkish language by Anh (2021), has four factors and consists of 24 items. Each factor has six items, rated using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 C strongly disagree to 4 – strongly agree. The factors are participatory humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor. There are four reverse items. Total mean scores were calculated for each factor, with higher scores indicating higher levels of humor for that factor. No total score is obtained from the scale. The highest score that can be obtained from each of the scale factors is 85, and the lowest score is 17. Cronbach's alpha values for the scale were between .65 and .75.

SECQ: The scale, adapted to the Turkish language by Ekşi et al. (2019), has five factors and consists of 25 items. Each factor has five items, rated using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – not true for me to 6 – very true for me. The factors are self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and taking responsibility. There are no reverse items in the scale, and no total score is obtained. The high score obtained from each sub-dimension of the scale indicates that the individual has the characteristic evaluated by the relevant sub-dimension. Cronbach's alpha values for the self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and taking responsibility sub-dimensions were found to be .62, .72, .68, .62, and .72, respectively.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected during the students' free time at school, outside of class hours. The students completed the questionnaire in small groups at school. Each student took about 20 minutes to complete the form. First, the young people were informed about the purpose of the research. Then, they were given information about how it would be conducted and how long it would take. Data collection forms were distributed to the young volunteers, who were asked to complete them. Forms from those who withdrew at any stage were also included. The data were collected anonymously. Incorrectly completed forms were not included in the research.

We carried out descriptive analyses using percentages and means. We used skewness and kurtosis tests to determine whether the data were normally distributed. We assessed differences between binary variables using the independent samples *t* test and the relationship between variables using Pearson correlation analysis. The level of association between variables was assessed by multiple linear regression analysis. The statistical significance level was accepted as .05, and we used the SPSS (IBM SPSS for Windows, Version 25) statistical package program in the analysis. The cut-off points used in the interpretation of the correlation coefficients obtained are as follows: 0.00–0.19 = very low, 0.20–0.39 = low, 0.40–0.69 = moderate, 0.70–0.89 = high and 0.90–1.00 = very high.

Results

Of the 504 adolescents who participated in the study, 49.8% ($n = 251$) identified as female, and 50.2% ($n = 253$) identified as male. In terms of age, 55.8% of participants were age 15 ($n = 281$), 28.0% were age 16 ($n = 141$), 14.1% were age 17 ($n = 71$), and 2.2% were age 18 ($n = 11$). In terms of grade, 35.5% of the participants were in grade 9 ($n = 179$), 27.2% in grade 10 ($n = 137$), 17.5% in grade 11 ($n = 88$) and 19.8% in grade 12 ($n = 100$).

According to the results of the independent samples *t*-test analyses carried out within the framework of the CHSQ, we observed significant differences in favor of males in the sub-dimensions of aggressive humor (male $\bar{x} = 11.55$; female $\bar{x} = 10.16$; $t(502) = -4.434$, $p < .05$) and self-defeating humor (male $\bar{x} = 6.85$, female $\bar{x} = 5.88$; $t(502) = -3.666$, $p < .05$). In other words, males have higher levels of aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. Regarding the SECQ, we observed a significant difference in favor of males in the sub-dimensions self-awareness (male: $M = 22.53$, female: $M = 21.45$; $t(502) = -2.087$, $p < .05$), self-management (male: $M = 19.12$, female: $M = 16.17$; $t(502) = -5.001$, $p < .05$) and taking responsibility (male: $M = 21.48$, female: $M = 5.82$, $t(502) = -2.291$, $p < .05$). In other words, males also have self-awareness, self-management, and taking responsibility. Table 1 shows the results of the CHSQ and SECQ analyses by gender.

Table 1. Results of CHSQ and SECQ Analyses by Gender

Variables	Gender	n	\bar{x}	ss	t	df	p
CHSQ							
Participatory humor	Female	251	16.79	4.71	.259		.795
	Male	253	16.68	4.72			
Self-enhancing humor	Female	251	14.68	5.35	.988		.324
	Male	253	14.20	5.54		502	
Aggressive humor	Female	251	10.16	3.57	-4.434		.000*
	Male	253	11.55	3.50			
Self-defeating humor	Female	251	5.88	2.76	-3.666		.000*
	Male	253	6.85	3.10			
SECQ							
Self-awareness	Female	251	21.45	5.79	-2.087		.037*
	Male	253	22.53	5.85			
Social awareness	Female	251	20.73	5.30	-.870		.384
	Male	253	21.15	5.74			
Self-management	Female	251	16.17	6.38	-5.001		.000*
	Male	253	19.12	6.85		502	
Relationship management	Female	251	20.43	5.14	-.437		.663
	Male	253	20.65	6.02			
Taking responsibility	Female	251	20.25	5.82	-2.291		.022*
	Male	253	21.48	6.19			

Note. * $p < 0.05$.

According to the results of the correlation analysis, shown in Table 2, there is a significant, positive, and very weak relationship between gender and aggressive humor ($r = .19, p < .001$), self-defeating humor ($r = .16, p < .001$), self-awareness ($r = .09, p < .005$), and taking responsibility ($r = .10, p < .005$). There is a significant, positive, and weak relationship between gender and self-management ($r = .22, p < .001$). There is also a significant, negative, and weak relationship between aggressive humor and relationship management ($r = -.25, p < .001$) and taking responsibility ($r = -.21, p < .001$). There is also a significant, negative, and very weak relationship between self-defeating humor and self-awareness ($r = -.14, p < .001$) and social awareness ($r = -.14, p < .001$).

Table 2. CHSQ and ECQ Correlation Analysis Results

	1	2a	2b	2c	2d	3a	3b	3c	3d	3e
1. Gender	1									
2. CHSQ										
2a. Participatory humor	-.01	1								
2b. Self-enhancing humor	-.04	.43**	1							
2c. Aggressive humor	.19**	.36**	.07	1						
2d. Self-defeating humor	.16**	.29**	.29**	.22**	1					
3. SECQ										
3a. Self-awareness	.09*	.18**	.13**	-.08	-.14**	1				
3b. Social awareness	.04	.36**	.22**	.09	-.14**	.50**	1			
3c. Self-management	.22**	.11*	.14**	-.01	.06	.43**	.33**	1		
3d. Relationship management	.02	.03	.14**	-.25**	.05	.41**	.28**	.39**	1	
3e. Taking responsibility	.10*	.07	.12**	-.21**	.01	.49**	.35**	.52**	.59**	1

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

According to the results of the regression analysis, shown in Table 3, the adolescents' gender predicted 11.9% of their humor style and social-emotional competence ($R^2 = 0.119$). However, when evaluated in terms of sub-dimensions, we found that the highest effect was obtained in terms of social awareness. Accordingly, adolescents' levels of participatory humor explain 12.6% of their social-emotional competence ($R^2 = 0.126$). As adolescents' levels of participatory humor increase, their social awareness increases by 36.4% ($\beta = 0.364$; $R^2 = 0.126$). In addition, adolescents' self-enhancing humor levels explain 4.8% of their social-emotional competence ($R^2 = 0.048$). As adolescents' self-enhancing humor levels increase, their social awareness increases by 19.2% ($\beta = 0.192$; $R^2 = 0.048$). Adolescents' aggressive humor levels explain 10.7% of their social-emotional competence ($R^2 = 0.107$). As adolescents' levels of aggressive humor increase, their social awareness decreases by 19.3% ($\beta = -0.193$; $R^2 = 0.107$). Finally, adolescents' levels of self-defeating humor explain 8.5% of their social-emotional competence ($R^2 = 0.085$). As adolescents' levels of self-defeating humor increase, their self-awareness decreases by 33.9% ($\beta = -0.339$; $R^2 = 0.085$), and their social awareness decreases by 25.8% ($\beta = -0.258$; $R^2 = 0.085$).

Table 3. CHSQ and ECQ Regression Analysis Results

Variables	B	SE	β	t	p
Gender	.971	.137		7.098	.000
Participatory humor	-.014	.006	-.128	-2.433	.015
Self-enhancing humor	-.008	.004	-.086	-1.800	.073
Aggressive humor	.030	.007	.219	4.568	.000
Self-defeating humor	.032	.008	.192	4.069	.000
Self-awareness	.010	.005	.113	2.014	.045
Social awareness	-.006	.005	-.071	-1.351	.177
Self-management	.014	.004	.196	3.819	.000
Relationship management	-.006	.005	-.066	-1.219	.223
Taking responsibility	.006	.005	.071	1.210	.227
<i>R</i> = .368	<i>R</i> ² = .135	<i>Adj. R</i> ² = .119	<i>F</i> = 8.574		
Participatory humor	11.240	.982		11.448	.000
Self-awareness	.036	.043	.045	.843	.400
Social awareness	.310	.042	.364	7.460	.000
Self-management	.015	.035	.021	.414	.679
Relationship management	-.058	.044	-.069	-1.325	.186
Taking responsibility	-.041	.045	-.053	-.915	.361
<i>R</i> = .367	<i>R</i> ² = .135	<i>Adj. R</i> ² = .126	<i>F</i> = 15.521		
Self-enhancing humor	8.683	1.185		7.328	.000
Self-awareness	-.014	.052	-.015	-.274	.784
Social awareness	.189	.050	.192	3.760	.000
Self-management	.046	.042	.058	1.094	.275
Relationship management	.084	.053	.087	1.587	.113
Taking responsibility	-.021	.054	-.023	-.384	.701
<i>R</i> = .240	<i>R</i> ² = .057	<i>Adj. R</i> ² = .048	<i>F</i> = 6.071		
Aggressive humor	12.905	.759		17.001	.000
Self-awareness	-.026	.033	-.042	-.783	.434
Social awareness	.125	.032	-.193	3.903	.000
Self-management	.074	.027	-.139	2.712	.007
Relationship management	-.139	.034	-.215	-4.065	.000
Taking responsibility	-.122	.035	-.205	-3.520	.000
<i>R</i> = .341	<i>R</i> ² = .116	<i>Adj. R</i> ² = .107	<i>F</i> = 13.065		
Self-defeating humor	5.664	.635		8.914	.000
Self-awareness	-.173	.028	-.339	-6.173	.000
Social awareness	.139	.027	-.258	5.157	.000
Self-management	.042	.023	.097	1.868	.062
Relationship management	.049	.029	.091	1.705	.089
Taking responsibility	-.007	.029	-.015	-.257	.797
<i>R</i> = .307	<i>R</i> ² = .094	<i>Adj. R</i> ² = .085	<i>F</i> = 10.339		

Discussion

Gender has always been an important factor considered in many studies of humor. Although other researchers have conducted studies on similar topics, our study is the first to examine the relationship between adolescents' use of humor style and social-emotional competence in the context of gender. We obtained significant findings in this study, which aimed to explore the relationship between adolescents' humor style and social-emotional competence in the context of gender differences. The findings generally supported the hypotheses and previous literature.

The first finding is that male adolescents have higher levels of aggressive and self-defeating humor. In other words, males prefer aggressive humor and self-defeating humor styles, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Hofmann et al., 2023; Schermer et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2016; Yaprak et al., 2018). Studies conducted with high school students in Türkiye also found similar results to our study (Çelebi Öncü & Uğurlular Çelik, 2021; Çetin, 2017). In these studies, the aggressive and self-defeating (negative) humor scores of male students were higher than the scores of female students. In addition, many other international studies have shown that males frequently use aggressive and self-defeating humor styles (James & Fox, 2016; Mahdjoub & Saihi, 2024; Salavera et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2021). The developmental period is likely to be important for the findings obtained, because adolescents who, due to their age, are not mentally mature enough during adolescence, may act out of empathy and reflect insulting and aggressive humor on those around them. According to a study conducted in China, this is because men tend to show less empathy than women (Wu et al., 2016). Halfpenny and James (2020) also highlighted the importance of age in humor styles.

The second finding is that males have higher self-awareness, self-management, and responsibility within the domain of social emotional competence. Our findings are consistent with results of some of the reviewed studies showing that males have better self-management (i.e., they have more ability to manage their own emotions; Petric & Szamoskozi, 2018; Portela-Pino et al., 2021; Salavera et al., 2019; Zych et al., 2018). In addition, some research findings show that females tend to obtain higher scores on variables related to the level of social competence and interpersonal relationships (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2016; DeWeerd & Rossi, 2012; Ferrándiz et al., 2012). However, other studies have confirmed that gender does not always have an impact on social-emotional skills and competence (López-González & Oriol, 2016; Rahayu & Mustikasari, 2020). This can be explained in the context of contradictory and inconclusive results regarding the different effects of adolescence on males and females. Therefore, adolescence is a critical period for the development of social and emotional competences.

Considering that adolescence is a period of life changes from a developmental point of view, that it contains different stressors, and that it is a process that requires adaptation, a high perception of social competence and the presence of peer support among adolescents will facilitate their adaptation to this process. This is because adolescents experience this stage with continuous and typical maturation, and they experience emotional transitions with greater social difficulties (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2019). Social competence plays a crucial role in individuals' interpersonal relationships and interactions. Karakoyun (2016) noted in his research that individuals with high levels of social competence also have high abilities to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships. In this context, there is a need to strengthen social interaction among adolescents, in order to identify, control, and manage social-emotional competencies (Cañabate et al., 2018; Caballero et al., 2018; Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2017; Losada et al., 2017).

Another finding in our study is that gender differences predict the relationship between humor styles and social-emotional competence. As young people's levels of participatory humor and self-enhancing humor increase, their social awareness significantly increases. In addition, as levels of aggressive humor and self-defeating humor increase, their social awareness and self-awareness significantly decrease (see Table 3). In

other words, while compatible humor styles support social-emotional competence, incompatible humor styles negatively affect social-emotional competence traits. As noted above, aggressive humor is considered a maladaptive humor style that threatens social relationships (Martin, 2007), and research has documented the detrimental effects of aggressive humor on social relationships. Furthermore, four humor styles have been shown to be related to different social variables. For example, agreeable humor styles are positively associated with social competence, happiness, perceived social support, life satisfaction, and resilience (Cann & Matson, 2014; Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Fitts et al., 2009; Ford et al., 2014; Yue et al., 2014). Moreover, loneliness, shyness, suicidal ideation, depression, anger, neuroticism, and social anxiety have been found to be negatively associated with adaptive humor styles (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Fitts et al., 2009; Schermer et al., 2017; Torres-Marín et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2013). Additionally, maladaptive humor styles have been found to be positively associated with depressive symptoms and loneliness but negatively associated with happiness (Ford et al., 2014; Schermer et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2013). A number of studies have shown that aggressive humor is associated with factors that disrupt social relationships, such as verbal and physical aggression, hostility, bullying, expression of anger toward others, socially undesirable behaviors, psychopathic traits, dysfunctional resistance, and decreased empathy (Cann & Matson, 2014; Dozois et al., 2013; Goswami et al., 2015; Martin, 2007; Sari, 2016; Torres-Marín et al., 2018; Young & Kyranides, 2022). These findings support the research showing a pattern in which maladaptive humor styles are associated with mental health problems, while adaptive humor styles are associated with better social relationships and mental health.

Humor is a way to support a positive outlook on life by providing positive emotions in the face of difficult, frightening, unbearable, and distressing situations (Ergözen & Ugurlu, 2019; Greene & King, 2021). Individuals who use an adaptive humor style are cheerful and happy, respect themselves and others, use humor to strengthen social relationships and reduce environmental tension, and use humor as a coping mechanism against the negative aspects of life. Humor also makes a beneficial contribution to physical and mental health, functioning as a coping method in situations that increase anxiety by providing individuals with positive emotions (Lin et al., 2021). In this context, the fact that male adolescents who participated in the study used aggressive and self-defeating humor styles more and at the same time had higher self-awareness, self-management, and responsibility-taking characteristics can be explained developmentally. Adolescence is undoubtedly one of the important turning points of human life. In this stage, where development is both rapid and intense, adolescents try to adapt to the changes in their bodies, emotions, behaviors, and thoughts, but sometimes they falter (Üstündağ, 2021). Most of the time, they think people do not understand them, and emotional fluctuations are observed. They want to be accepted and admired and to identify with their peers. Especially by establishing social relationships with their peers, they develop social relationship-building skills (Üstündağ, 2021). In this context, the aggressive and self-defeating humor styles used by adolescents can be seen as part of the range of behaviors that occur as a result of thoughtlessness, without any intent to harm, as they also make greater use of self-awareness, self-management, and taking responsibility.

Limitations

Our study had a number of limitations that need to be considered. First, the cross-sectional nature of the study did not allow us to test the exact causal relationship between variables; this will require longitudinal studies with large samples. Second, self-report assessment in adolescents is limited in providing a complete picture of social-emotional competence and use of humor styles. We recommend that a combination of teacher assessment, peer assessment, field observation, and individual interview methods be used to obtain richer information. Research on gender, humor, and social-emotional competence is compelling, but cultural, social, and educational factors may influence young people's preferences and uses of humor, so the results of the research cannot be considered generalizable.

Conclusion

Ours is a pioneering study that aimed to explore the relationship between different humor styles and social-emotional competence and gender differences in Turkish adolescents. The study revealed the relationship between gender and humor styles and social-emotional competence in this population. We found that Turkish male adolescents used more aggressive and self-defeating humor. The results showed that Turkish males had higher levels of self-awareness, self-management, and responsibility in the area of social-emotional competence. In this context, the study is expected to make an important contribution to the literature on Turkish adolescents.

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